

ADVENTURE STORIES NO. 4

Editor : F M NAYLOR

THE MYSTERY OF THE MARSHES

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CHAPTER I

MR. GAGE TELLS A STORY

THE slow local train gave a sudden lurch, just as young Andy Watts reached up to the luggage rack for his strapped and labelled suitcase.

He gave a little gasp as the train shook and quivered over the points. As he flung out one hand wildly for balance, he knocked off the hat of the only other occupant of the carriage, an elderly, thin faced man, with a halo of white hair. What was worse, an extra shudder over the last of the points made Andy drag the suitcase down, and it landed with a thud on the elderly man's head.

"Good losh alive," mumbled Andy.

That was Andy's favourite expression at the moment, and it seemed to meet the occasion very well.

The gentleman leaned back against the cushions of the dusty carriage, dazed a little, his thin yellowish hands raised to his white head. Andy's dark grey eyes just

widened and widened. Words didn't come easily to him then, for a change.

"I—I——really, sir, I—I am sorry," he gasped at last. "I thought we were running into my station——."

"Do you have to brain me, young man, when you reach your station?"

"W—well, I——." Then Andy saw that the old gentleman's slate-grey eyes were twinkling a little, and he gave a little grin himself.

"I really am sorry, s—sir, but it—it was a bit funny—I mean, the way it slid down on to your napper,——I mean, your head, and——."

"When I was your age, a head was a napper, and I hope it always will be a napper. And——but there, we're running into Woolham Ferrers. You get out here, I understand?"

"Eh? Woolham Ferrers?" Andy looked blank. "Why, no, sir——I thought this next station was Bardwell-on-Crouch."

"And I've nearly had my brains impaled by the sharp end of a suitcase, just because you thought this was Bardwell," sighed the old gentleman. "This is just the junction, young man—we've three more stations to go. And I'd be very obliged if you'd keep that suitcase on the seat out of harm's way, for the rest of the journey."

Andy grinned, and stowed his suitcase in the corner.

His nose always wrinkled up when he smiled, or when he was thoughtful, which was about in equal proportions. Andy was thirteen, a tall and sturdy thirteen, with a lean, rather white face, and a mop of black, wiry hair which never seemed to need either comb or brush.

A porter was walking up and down the platform now, calling out the name of the station in a mournful voice, as if he was heartily sick of the place. A few passengers

got down. There was a rattle of empty milk churns, and then the slow local train gathered up its energy to crawl away from the little junction, and Andy stared out eagerly, over the flat fields, and the ribbon of river which wound like a silver S out towards the North Sea.

Andy was excited.

This was the summer holiday, and he was off to spend a month with Bill Goodey, his cousin, whose father owned a farm on the edge of Bardwell marshes. Andy, who loved excitement and adventure of any sort, thought that the name of Colward Farm, where cousin Bill lived, conjured up thrilling possibilities.

He even thought of the marshes skirting the North Sea, which he had never visited, as being the scenes of sinister activities, with boats laden with smuggled goods creeping up under cover of mist at night. Andy's vivid imagination could picture anything. A whole, exciting month was ahead of him, he was sure of that.

"So you're going to Bardwell, are you, young man?"

Andy warmed to the old gentleman, who had been such a brick about being hit over the head with the heavy suitcase. He liked the "young man" expression too, which somehow raised him to the level of his fellow passenger, who was now lighting a thin foreign-looking cheroot.

"To Colward Farm, sir. Bardwell-on-Crouch."

"Colward Farm—to my friend Daniel Goodey, eh? Now you would be a relation of his, I'm sure."

"Nephew. Bill Goodey is my cousin—we had him up to our place at Kilburn for Christmas, and now I'm taking my summer holidays with him."

"And very nice, too." The man inspected the end of his cheroot. "I suppose being hit over the—ah—the napper is a kind of introduction, but you can't keep

referring to me as the old gentleman you biffed with a suitcase, can you? My name is Gage—Mr. Evelyn Gage.”

“Evelyn? B—but——.”

“I know. Everyone says that it’s a girl’s name. When I was out in China the coolies called me ‘Little Flower’—and I know they were laughing at me. It’s been a burden, that name of mine. It’s one of those mixed names, like Leslie and Lesley and Dana, which is suitable for either boy or girl. I’m sure you haven’t one of those kind of names, young man,” he beamed.

“Huh, I’ve never met a girl named Andy. That’s my name—Andy Watts.”

“And a very boyish name, too. Andy Watts. Supercharged with electricity, eh?”

Andy smiled faintly at the little joke. He had to suffer several such at school.

“And I’m sure that you’re a boy,” went on Mr. Gage, as the train wound along the track close to the low wall of the river, “who is very fond of adventure.”

Andy nodded. He was thinking that perhaps Mr. Evelyn Gage had spent many years in China, for his thin face was yellowish, which made his long white hair seem even whiter. There were deep lines from his thin, arched nostrils to the corners of his mouth. His loose tweed suit and flowing black tie gave him an ‘arty’ appearance.

“I expect you will find that adventure on the marshes, young Andy,” Mr. Gage said then.

“Do you think so? Good losh alive, do you really think so, sir?” Andy said eagerly. “I’ve pictured the marshes as——.”

“Let me tell you,” beamed Mr. Gage. “Sinister and mysterious boats moving up the river under cover of the mist. Slinking figures creeping over the sea-wall. A

password, muttered in the darkness—have you been thinking of all those things, Andy?”

Andy pushed the paper-covered magazine he had been reading out of sight behind him. He coloured up a little.

“W—well——.”

“I know—I was young once myself. Only then it was cowboys and Indians with us. But still——.” He paused and looked at the growing ash on his cheroot. “Has your cousin, Bill Goodey, ever told you about the Headless Dog?” he asked.

“H—Headless Dog?”

“I can see that he hasn’t. And perhaps I shouldn’t, either, but the whole village is talking about it.”

Andy wriggled on his seat, and wrinkled his nose thoughtfully.

“I read about a Headless Dog once, in a book of old legends,” he said.

“It’s been a legend in East Anglia for over a hundred years, but I’ve never heard of the ghostly animal coming so far down into Essex. The locals have even improved on that,” Mr. Evelyn Gage laughed. “They talk of a Horseless Carriage that floats about over the marshes now.”

“G—good losh alive,” mumbled Andy. This was better than he had hoped. Why hadn’t Bill told him of all these exciting things, when he wrote?

“But let me hasten to add that I’ve never seen any of these—ah—these strange visitations,” Mr. Gage added hastily. “And I live deep down on the marshes—a mile or two beyond friend Goodey’s farm. There’s just the moan of the North Sea and the seagulls and the plovers to keep me company—apart from a man who I sometimes think has forgotten how to speak—and I’ve never seen the Headless Dog or the Horseless Carriage.”

Andy hugged his knees. He had a dim idea that his fellow passenger was excited as well, although he hid it.

"I'm jolly glad I met you, sir. I mean, if Bill tries to scare me with his talk of the Headless Carriage——."

"Horseless Carriage. And Headless Dog."

"That's it, sir. Well, I can tell him I know all about it, can't I? And maybe we can come down to your place and keep watch, eh, Mr. Gage?"

"I'll be glad to see you, any time. It gets very lonely, down at Limpey's Hall."

Andy just hugged his knees again, and let his vivid mind wander over what he had heard. Who said that a holiday in the country wasn't going to be very thrilling? He tingled a little at the thought of the month ahead.

The train had passed two more stations. With each stop there was the rattle of milk churns, the melancholy call of a porter, who seemed to be the sole occupant of the station. Now the train was slowing down again, and Andy could see a huddle of red roofs, against the sheen of the river, which had broadened out now.

"That's Bardwell, and the River Crouch. Will you have anyone to meet you, young Andy?"

"Cousin Bill will be at the station, I expect. It's quite a way from the station to Colward Farm, I believe."

"Three miles. I've a car waiting for me, but I expect you will have a conveyance of some kind."

The train was slowing down now. Andy seized his suitcase. Then the train stopped with a jerk, and he fell, suitcase forward, into the lap of Mr. Gage. He saw the slate-grey eyes glint for a moment, and then the benevolent smile came to Mr. Gage's face again.

"Well—well, it seems that I have to be knocked about by you, young man," he gasped. "You'll be safer when you're off this train."

Andy mumbled that he was sorry, and then he saw Cousin Bill on the platform, and he had pitched out his case and had jumped down, almost before the train stopped. Mr. Gage alighted and passed the two lads, nodding pleasantly.

"Did you come down with Mr. Gage, Andy?" Bill asked. He was a year older than Andy, and heavier built, his rather stolid face tanned brown, and his tow-coloured hair in untidy wisps.

"He's black and blue all over, I reckon—I kept biffing him with my suitcase," grinned Andy. "But he was a sport, though. He's asked us down to his place on the marshes to hunt for the Headless Dog," he added airily.

"So you know about that, do you?" said Bill disgustedly. "Huh, and I was telling Nancy that we'd scare the pants off you when we told you about it."

"Scare the pants off me," snorted Andy. "And who is Nancy, anyway? If you expect me to spoil a holiday by going around with silly girls——."

"Did you say silly girls?"

The question was clear and sharp, and Andy swung round, his face pink. He hadn't heard anyone else come along the platform, but now he saw a slim girl of about his own age, with a riot of red hair and a faintly freckled face, dressed in a jersey and a pair of long, shabby grey flannel trousers.

"W—well——."

"There are girls, and there are silly girls——and I'm just Nancy Bates," said the girl, in a clear cut, lets-know-where-we-stand sort of voice. "You just ask Bill. I can beat him at anything I try."

"She's all right, Andy," Bill mumbled awkwardly. Then he grinned. "So long as you don't call her Ginger."

"We might as well have this out straight from the

start," Nancy said, putting her sandalled foot down firmly on the platform. "I don't like being called Ginger, and if anyone starts it——."

"She tears 'em up, Andy."

"And I can, Bill Goodey."

Andy lifted his suitcase, and looked at Nancy with less scornful eyes. She didn't look the namby-pamby sort, thank goodness.

"I reckon we'll all get on together," he said diplomatically. "And if—heh, I can carry my own bag, Ginger."

"Now look here, Andy Watts——."

"Sorry. I mean Nancy. Golly, I am putting my foot in it today. But I don't need a girl to carry my bag, thank you. How do we get to the farm, Bill?"

"You'll see. Won't he, Nancy?"

There seemed to be some joke about that, and Andy saw what it was, after he had given up his ticket. In the station yard was a tractor, with a huge trailer behind, and a brown-faced farm hand waved from the iron seat.

"We had to bring a load of trussed hay in, so we thought we could pick you up at the same time," explained Bill. "Dad was too busy starting the harvest to come up in the car."

"And we didn't want Andy to have any grand ideas from the start," Nancy said impishly.

"This suits me fine," Andy grinned, pitching his suitcase into the trailer.

The tractor, with the huge balloon tyres for road work, was started up, and the three children dangled their legs over the edge of the trailer. As they chug-chugged out of the station yard, Andy saw Mr. Evelyn Gage drive past in a shiny black limousine.

"Nice car," he observed.

"A straight eight," Nancy said promptly. "An American car, forty h.p., with independent suspension, and——."

"Shut up, Nancy—you don't have to try to impress Andy right away."

"I'm just telling him, that's all," the girl said beligerently.

"And I could have had a ride in that," said Andy, with a whistle. "Still, it's nicer here. Bill, why didn't you tell me about the Horseless Carriage when you wrote?"

"Horseless Carriage?" Bill's brown face looked blank.

"You mean Headless Dog," Nancy said pityingly. "And we wanted to startle you with that, and——."

"But Mr. Gage said there was a Horseless Carriage, as well as a Headless Dog." Andy slapped his knee in triumph, as the tractor, after rattling through the sleepy little village of Bardwell-on-Crouch, turned the corner against the beautiful, grey-stoned church. "Don't tell me that I've brought you some news, Bill—well, that is rich."

"We've heard about the Dog, but we don't take any notice of it. But a Horseless Carriage—have you heard anything about that, Nancy?"

The girl shook her red gold hair vigorously.

"Mr. Gage was pulling Andy's leg, I expect."

"He was not. And why should he, anyway? And besides——." He broke off, and stared ahead through the slatted sides of the trailer. "Are these the marshes?" he asked eagerly.

He didn't need a reply to that.

The small fields fringed with elm trees had given place to a low, flat expanse of marsh, stretching away to the sea wall in the far distance. Here and there were bright golden patches, which showed the huge fields of ripe corn,

but mostly it was the short, green, coarse grass of the marshes, shimmering in the heat haze.

On each side of the narrow dusty marsh road was a wide ditch fringed with bulrushes. Plovers, disturbed by the noise of the tractor, wheeled over the flat marshes with their melancholy cries.

"We're nearly home," Bill said. He gave a gusty sort of sigh. "Andy, I—well—don't talk too much about Larry, will you?"

"Larry? Why not?" Larry was Bill's elder brother, about twenty-three, and Andy had only seen him once.

"He—he isn't home now, you see," Bill explained awkwardly, and Nancy's freckled face looked worried.

"But you know where he is, surely? Of course, Bill, if there's something I shouldn't know——."

"Of course you should know," Bill answered hurriedly. "Only mother gets so worried, whenever Larry is mentioned. He——."

"Larry Goodey left home to go to London to paint pictures, or something silly like that, and he doesn't even write home and I think he should be ashamed of himself," burst out Nancy, in her direct way.

"You don't have to run down my brother," glowered Bill.

"Well, it's true, isn't it? I'm only thinking of your mother, Bill. I like Larry, but——."

"It's right enough," sighed Bill, as Nancy broke off.

"Although—well, perhaps Larry is hard up, and doesn't like to write and admit it. He's always been keen on painting. He got it from Mum, I expect."

Andy nodded absently.

He had heard from his own mother that his Aunt

Julia Goodey had been an art mistress at a school, before his Uncle Daniel met and married her, and took her to Colward Farm to live. He thought, idly, that if Cousin Larry had come to London to paint, it was strange that he hadn't come over to Kilburn to see them all. Then the thoughts left his mind, for the tractor had swung off the flat, dusty marsh road, and clattered to a stop at the beginning of a chase up to a farm.

"We'll be leaving you here, Nancy. Nancy lives here, Andy," said Bill.

Andy looked at the cottage as Nancy, a lithe and leggy figure, jumped down from the trailer.

It looked as if it might once have been two cottages, for there were two front doors. The old beams of the walls were covered with Virginia creeper. The roof was of red, curly pantiles, and at each end of the cottage was a rain water butt, painted a vivid green. Picked out in gleaming brass letters over one of the doors was the name, "Kiney Cottage."

Andy's eyes kindled.

This was real country. The low, close-cropped "bread and butter" hedge, the little white wicker gate to the cottage, the flower beds glowing with colour, and the bit of lawn at the back, with an apple tree stuck right in the very centre.

"They used to be the cowmen's cottages, in the old days," Bill said. "And then Nancy's mother bought them, and knocked them into one cottage, and—oh, here comes Mrs. Bates now."

"You needn't say that as if my mother is an ogress, Bill Goodey," snapped Nancy.

Anyone less like an ogress could hardly be imagined. Mrs. Bates came down the garden path, peeling off her earth stained gloves. Her red gold hair, like Nancy's,

was disordered now, and her young, clever face had a smile of welcome for Andy.

"You'll be Andy, of course," she said, as Andy and Bill jumped down from the trailer. "Nancy has been excited about having you down."

"Excited—huh!" Nancy scowled, and scuffed a stone along the lane with her foot. "Over a bit of a boy from London!"

"Nancy! You know you said——."

"Mummy writes books, Andy, and she imagines all sorts of things," the red-haired girl broke in quickly. "They're jolly good books, mind you," she added loyally.

"Adventure books, Mrs. Bates?" asked Andy, his eyes eager.

"Perhaps you wouldn't like my sort of book, Andy," smiled Nancy's mother. "There are no hidden passages, no slinky Chinamen——."

"Good losh alive, Mr. Gage ribbed me about that."

"I just write simple little nature stories. I don't think even Nancy will read them."

"Willie the Wagtail. Roberta the Robin," said Nancy, with the fine disgust of a young daughter. "Don't you laugh, Andy Watts—they're good stories for kids, and mummy knows I'm too old to read 'em, and—mummy." She danced up and down. "Andy came down in the train with Mr. Gage."

"That isn't a crime for either of them," said Mrs. Bates.

"But I haven't finished telling you." Nancy paused for a dramatic effect. "Mr. Gage told Andy that there was a Horseless Carriage, floating about the marshes at night."

Her mother's fine grey eyes clouded.

"It's foolish talk, and you're not to repeat it, Nancy. Bill, I'm looking to you—and to Andy—to keep Nancy

out of mischief. And hurry in and wash, Nancy—you look terribly grubby!”

“Wash!” muttered the girl, in disdain, but she ran along the path, indoors. Bill and Andy climbed on to the back of the trailer again, and the tractor chug-chug-chugged along the chase.

“She’s jolly nice,” Andy said. “Have you read any of her books, Bill?”

His cousin wriggled uneasily. “We-el——.”

“You have, and you don’t like to admit it, ’cos they’re for kids.”

“If you tell Nancy I—I’ll paste you,” replied Bill, glowering at nothing in particular. “Maybe they are for kids, but—but Mrs. Bates can write nature stuff. And I like reading about birds and eels and little animals and—you’re not laughing, Andy Watts.”

“I’d like to read some of ’em myself,” Andy said diplomatically.

“All right, then. Mrs. Bates runs the Girl Guides down in the village as well, but Nancy won’t join. Said she’d rather join the Sea Scouts, and is as mad as a hatter because she can’t. Well, Andy, we’re home.”

Andy’s eyes were glowing now.

So this was Colward Farm, set right on the edge of the marshes. He jumped down from the trailer, and looked around, hardly knowing where to look first, and breathing in the strong, marsh air.

The low, beamed and plastered farmhouse appeared to have weathered the gusty marsh winds for centuries. The roof was tiled with the same kind of red tile that Andy had seen at Kiney Cottage, and the quaint, curved chimneys reached crazily up to the sky. The massive front door was half hidden by thick green trailing creeper, and looked as if it had not been opened for centuries.

Andy, in his usual imaginative way, could visualise hidden passages and secret panels inside the huge farmhouse.

Towering above the house, and to the right of it, was the high barn, its dark thatch moss-grown with age in patches. The sun made deep shadows across the cobbled yard. Beyond, through the farm gate were the yards, the stables and the cow sheds. Close by, in the home meadow, was the horse pond, over which the old willows leaned, as if whispering to the green, stagnant water.

"Better than smoky old London, eh, Andy?"

Andy drew a deep breath. "For a holiday, anyway," he said. "We're going to have some fun, Bill," he added, his eyes dancing.

But, as he saw his Aunt Julia hurrying from the farmhouse to greet him, even Andy, with his vivid mind, couldn't foresee the startling adventures which lay ahead of the three of them.



CHAPTER II

THE HORSELESS CARRIAGE

“W E’LL have to get some colour into those cheeks of yours, young Andy,” said Mrs. Goodey, and she helped Andy to some more new potatoes, and fresh green peas.

“I’m tough enough, Aunt Julia,” grinned Andy, rubbing at his face.

“Maybe, but I want to see you nice and brown, like Bill here. I reckon if Larry is stewing over his work in London——.”

She broke off, and went hurriedly into the low red-tiled kitchen to get the pot of strong-brewed tea for her husband. Bill and Uncle Daniel exchanged a quick, worrying look. Uncle Daniel, burned a deep red after a day in the harvest field, rubbed at his greying hair.

“Our Larry is all right, you can take it from me, mother,” he said heartily, when Mrs. Goodey came back.

"He won't write until he's sold a few pictures, you mark my words. He knows that we didn't hold with him a-going."

"He could have written. And I do worry—it isn't any good pretending that I don't." Aunt Julia, tall, still commanding-looking, with streaks of grey in her soft brown hair, made a rare to-do of pouring out the tea. "What are you reckoning on doing, Andy?"

"He's going to hunt Headless Dogs and Horseless Carriages," Bill said, with a sly nudge at Andy.

"Bill, you haven't been telling him that rubbish," Aunt Julia said sharply.

"I never had the chance, Mum. Mr. Gage told him. Andy travelled down with him."

"Then Mr. Gage should have known better than to tell Andy. Headless Dogs, indeed! And a Horseless Carriage—I've never heard that before. Have you, Daniel?"

"There's no telling what some of the marsh men'll see, when they go up to Bardwell for a few pints of ale," said Uncle Daniel with a broad smile. "I'd rather see the lads go eeling or swimming than looking for dogs without heads. And helping me on the farm, eh, young Andy?"

"I'd like that fine, Uncle Daniel."

"Can you milk a cow? And pitch a sheaf of corn? And manage a horse rake, and——."

"He'll be able to do all those before he's been here a month, I'm sure," Aunt Julia said vigorously. "Anything more to eat, Andy? 'Cos if not, I know Bill is dying to show you round the farm."

Nancy was sitting cross-legged over the yard gate when the two boys went out.

"What are you showing Andy first, Bill?" she asked, and there was the hint of mischief in her eyes.

"Oh, we'll just amble around, I think."

The red-head jumped down from the gate. "I wondered if Andy would like to undress a horse," she said solemnly. Andy held out one leg.

"Pull the other one, Ginger. Undress a——."

"What did you call me?" the girl said wrathfully.

"Er—Nancy, I think," grinned Andy. "And what's this gag about undressing a horse?"

"It isn't a gag, is it, Bill? You don't know anything about the country until you can unharness a horse. Isn't that right, Bill?"

Bill grinned. "There are old Blossom and Prince coming in from the harvest field now. Andy can try on them."

"How long was old Dad Witchell in hospital after Blossom bit him?" Nancy said solemnly.

"Don't scare him, Nancy. Come on, Andy—we'll see if you can undress a horse."

Andy followed them, across the cobbled yard to the stables, to which the heavy farm horses had clip-clopped their way. He was quite sure that there was some little game on, but he was willing to learn. The brown, wrinkled-faced farm hand was taking off the heavy chain saddle and back traces.

"Mr. Witchell, my cousin Andy here is going to take off old Blossom's collar," Bill said, and Nancy winked.

"I was telling Andy how long you were in hospital, after Blossom had bitten you, Mr. Witchell."

"Oh, ar. Bad, warn't it?" His wrinkled face beamed. "A lump right out of me owd showder."

Andy advanced cautiously across the cobbled floor of the stable.

"And—and this is Blossom?" he said, slowly. "She looks quiet enough."

"Of course she's quiet, Andy. All you've got to do is take off her collar."

"This thing?" Andy touched timidly the padded collar, round the great neck of the heavy farm horse. He noticed Nancy dancing with impish glee.

"Uh-huh. You just try, Andy."

Andy looked up into the liquid brown eyes of old Blossom, and then doubtfully at the collar. There was a trick somewhere, of course. Cautiously he lifted the heavy collar along the neck, but he couldn't get it over the horse's ears. Blossom whinnied, and made a playful snap at him with strong, yellow teeth.

"I—I think——."

"We can't initiate him into the Colward Farm Club, Bill," Nancy said, solemnly. "Like this, see, Andy."

She patted old Blossom, swung the collar round his neck, so that the wider round part at the bottom was now at the top, and slipped it easily over the horse's head.

Blossom muzzled her hand. Andy grinned feebly.

"So that's the trick?"

"We catch all the folks from town on that," Nancy laughed.

"I'll know next time. What do we see now?"

"The milking sheds, eh, Bill?"

"You're not going to try to get me to milk a cow, are you?" Andy said, alarmed.

"Ass," Nancy said witheringly. "The cows had their last milking hours ago. You are a duffer, Andy Watts."

"I could jolly well lose you in London, and I reckon you'd be scared of crossing Kilburn High Street, in the rush hour, and if I——."

"Peace, children. We've plenty to see yet."

There was, too, and Nancy took as much pride as Bill in showing Andy round the farm. Everything was new to Andy's eyes.

The cows were out on the marsh, but Andy saw the low clean milking shed, with the block of salt at each stall, and the bowl which bubbled up clean fresh water whenever the cow pressed her nose down to drink. They had a beaker full of cold milk in the dairy, and then they went into the stack yard.

One wheat stack was finished, and neatly crowned with bright yellow thatch. Another one was half completed, the big, ungainly elevator still and silent now. Andy looked over the quiet marshes, still shimmering with heat haze, although the sun was beginning to set.

"Would that be Mr. Gage's house?" he said eagerly, pointing towards a red-roofed house which seemed miles across the flat marshes.

"That's Limpey's Hall. Dad says it's a shame—it used to be good wheat-land down there, but the tides broke the sea-wall down years ago, and the salt water spoiled the land for farming."

"And Mr. Gage has put a high wire fence all round the house," sniffed Nancy, tossing back her red hair. "Mother says there's no need for that, in such a friendly place as Bardwell marshes."

"Perhaps he has something valuable there," Andy said eagerly. "Old Oriental curios? Yes, that'd be it. He told me he used to live in China."

"I wouldn't trust him an inch," said Nancy.

"You're talking silly, both of you," said Bill, in his stolid way. "If you go imagining things like that you never know where you will end up. And there's your mother waving to you, Nancy—I expect it's your bed-time."

"Bed-time! Bed-time! If that's a crack, Bill Goodey—"

"She's calling you, anyway. See you tomorrow, Nancy."

Nancy said goodnight to the two boys, and ran off home across the marshes, a leggy figure, with the setting sun shining on her wild red hair. Andy skimmed a stone at a water rat, which popped its nose from the side of the ditch.

"She's not a bad sort," he conceded. "I don't mind her at all."

"She's good fun," Bill said stoutly. "I expect you're ready for bed, Andy?"

"A bit."

"We'll go in, shall we? I expect there'll be some cocoa."

There was, too, and a huge slice of cake which Andy slyly shared with Mick, the farm collie, for he didn't feel hungry at all. Aunt Julia fussed about, showing him his cosy little room next to Bill's, turning down his bedclothes, and packing away his things.

At last the two boys were in bed.

It was dark now. Uncle Daniel generated his own electricity for the farm and the house, and Andy lay with the light on for a time, calling out to Bill in the next room. Then he switched off the light, snuggled under the clothes, until only his eyes were free to peep out of the window.

The moon had risen, and was picking out the low rafters of Andy's bedroom. An owl hooted, startling the boy for a moment, and then he grinned shamefacedly.

Huh, he'd have to get used to the country noises.

The plovers wheeling about in the darkness over the marshes, the horses stamping in the stables, the strident crowing of a cockerel—Andy heard all those, as he thought over his day.

Maybe tomorrow he would see Mr. Gage again. Maybe before long he might even see the Headless Dog, unless, like all old legends, it was much exaggerated. Then he

went off to sleep, to dream about the exciting days which lay ahead of him.

Andy woke with a start, two hours later.

He wondered what had awakened him, and then he heard the cows, lowing in the field. Of course, a noise like that was too common to wake the rest of the household. The old farm-house was quiet. The moon threw deep shadows into the room, and then it too was blotted out by a dark cloud.

A drink—yes, he would like a drink of water.

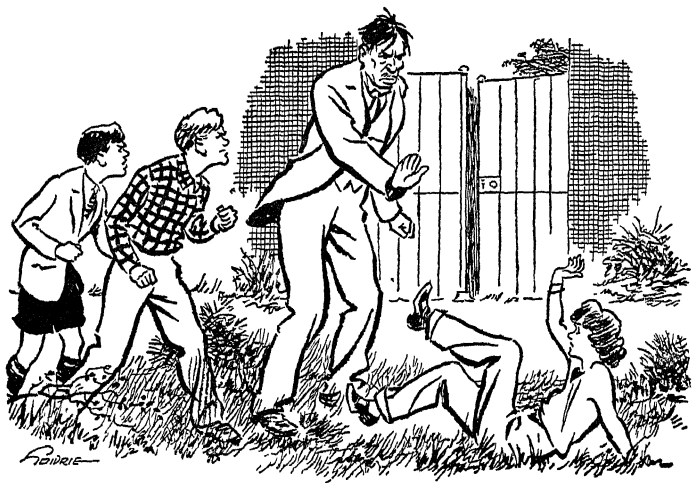
Andy threw back the clothes, and padded across to the washstand in his bare feet. There was a glass of water there, he knew, but he never reached it. He was passing the uncurtained window when he gave a gasp.

The next moment he was clutching at the edge of the window sill, and staring across the marshes.

An old-fashioned brougham carriage was travelling swiftly along, and, from this distance, it seemed to be floating on air. It was ghostly white, and every detail showed clear in the darkness. The high driver's seat was empty, and the shafts of the carriage were sticking out ahead, but no horses were pulling it.

"The—the Horseless Carriage," gasped Andy, and a little shiver ran up his spine.

And then, just as suddenly, the ghostly carriage disappeared. Andy rubbed his eyes. One moment it had been there, in all its eeriness, and the next it had vanished, and Andy could see nothing, except the marshes, so dark and quiet under the bank of lowering clouds in the night sky.



CHAPTER III

INSIDE LIMPEY'S HALL

ANDY wasn't quite sure how long he stood by the window.

He felt the night breeze ruffle his pyjama jacket, and he told himself that he wasn't frightened, not even a little bit, but he was. He heard Bill cough, next door, and he padded in there, glad for someone to talk to.

Bill had coughed in his sleep, however. Andy shook him by the shoulder, until he blinked up sleepily.

"Wassup—can't you go to sleep, Andy?" he mumbled.

"Bill—listen. I just saw the Horseless Carriage, gliding across the marshes."

Bill scrambled up in bed, and ran his hands through his tow-coloured hair. The moon had come out from behind the clouds again now, revealing him as he nodded his head wisely.

"I thought you'd go to bed and dream about that,

Andy," he said. "I suppose you didn't see a pack of headless dogs as well, for good measure?"

Andy pushed his cousin's head down in the pillow.

"I suppose you think I didn't jolly well see that Horseless Carriage? Well, I did, Bill. Honestly—I wasn't dreaming. I vote we go and have a look and see what we can see."

Bill brushed his hair out of his eyes. "You're starting off on your adventures early, aren't you? Or——."

"Do I have to go alone? Or am I to tell Nancy tomorrow that you were scared?"

"Scared—huh! I'm sleepy, that's all. And I don't think you saw anything, anyway."

"I'm going out to look, as soon as I've dressed. Don't make a noise, Bill."

Andy hurried back to his own room, and quickly dressed in shirt, trousers, and black canvas shoes. Bill was reluctantly dressing, when he returned.

"So you are coming?"

"I suppose I shall have to look after you—you'll be falling into one of those marsh ditches if I don't."

"Have you got a torch? And do we climb out of the window?" Andy asked eagerly.

"That's just what we have to do. There's a torch on my bike in the cart-shed, I believe. A fine cousin you are, making me go out at this time of the night," mumbled Bill, but Andy knew that Bill was just as excited as he was at the thought of rambling over the marshes at past midnight.

It wasn't difficult to climb down from Bill's bedroom window. Mick, the yard dog, growled a little as they sped across the cobbled yard, but a whispered word from Bill soon quietened him. They found the torch on the lamp bracket of Bill's cycle in the cart-shed, and

then they went out of the yard, and down the chase.

"I'll bet Nancy wishes—heh, what are you stopping for, Andy?" demanded Bill.

"I'm just getting the direction, that's all. Just a minute."

The moon was bright over the quiet marshes now. Andy could see the window of his bedroom, and he visualised again the Horseless Carriage floating over the sleeping earth.

"I saw it just about there." He flung out his right hand. "And then it disappeared, just about there——." he pointed with his left hand. "And——."

"That's very helpful, I must say," Bill retorted scornfully. "That's anywhere between Foulness Island, the other side of the river, and Folywell Point, near to Mr. Gage's house."

"But it was close, Bill. Perhaps—perhaps it was going down the marsh road?" Andy said eagerly.

"Do you think the horse that wasn't there would know the way?"

Andy grunted, and went on up the chase. He was beginning to have doubts himself now; the marshes looked so peaceful under the moon. They reached Kiney's Cottage, however, and were passing it to reach the winding marsh road when they heard a soft, low call.

"Bill. Andy."

It was Nancy, leaning halfway out of her bedroom window. She made signs to them that she was coming down, and when she did, closing the door quietly behind her, her thin, expressive face was alive with excitement.

"Why are you out?—what have you seen?" she almost bubbled. "Did you——?"

"Andy had too much for supper and thought he saw the Horseless Carriage."

"Did you see it, Andy?" The girl clutched at his arms, and then she suddenly relaxed. "I'm glad I didn't dream it," she said simply.

"Good losh alive, did you—Nancy——?"

"Yes. I saw it. And—and I was scared."

The simple words from Nancy made Bill twist his stray locks of tow-coloured hair between his fingers.

"So you think you saw it, Nancy?"

"I don't think—I just know." The girl's grey-green eyes were wide, and rather awed. "I couldn't sleep, and then I remembered I'd forgotten to shut up the chickens—Mummy was late home last night, and asked me to do it—and I jumped out of bed and—well, there it was. Just past the cottage here, a silent, luminous, ghostly carriage——."

"Nancy Bates——."

"It's true, I tell you. Ask Andy, if you don't believe me. Andy, wasn't it eerie, and ghostly, and——."

"You'll be scaring yourself in a minute," Bill said, in his stolid way. "I suppose there was something or other—you couldn't both have dreamed it. Come on."

He led the way on to the marsh road, which was unfolded like a silver, curling ribbon under the soft glow of the moon.

"I'm jolly glad you two came along—I'd have been too scared to go to sleep," confessed Nancy. "And mother would have given me a dose of medicine if I'd told her. This is fun, though, isn't it? I mean, it is now."

"Bags we walk down the marsh road, to see what we can find," Andy said.

"I think we might as well. You two have got me curious now—although there can't possibly be a ghostly Horseless Carriage," said Bill, determined to keep his doubts until the last.

There was no need for the torch, down the winding road.

For Andy, used to the noise and bustle of Kilburn in London, it was an exciting experience. The rushes by the marsh ditch rustled in the night breeze. Now and again there was a plop-plop as a water rat dived for safety, and once a rabbit went squealing across the marshes. There was something unreal about the moon-bathed marshes—and something sinister and eerie too, Andy decided.

He stopped soon, and looked across towards Colward Farm.

"I should think it'd be just about here where the Horseless Carriage disappeared," he said doubtfully.

"I suppose it was lifted up by a sky hook and tucked away behind the clouds," suggested Bill.

"You needn't be so sarcastic about it all, Bill Goodey—you know jolly well we weren't mistaken," Nancy said stormily. "And if—heh, what's that?"

She bent by the side of the dusty road, near to the short grass which led to the wide ditch, and picked up something in her hand. The two boys crowded round, and Bill shone his torch, although he didn't really need to.

"Just a bit of an old farm stack cloth," he said with scorn.

Nancy rubbed it between her fingers.

"It's too thin for that, Bill Goodey. And see, there's a brass eyelet, and a cord running through it. I wonder what it could be."

Andy took it from her. He saw the jagged edge of the canvas, where it had been torn, and the thin, long cord with the frayed end.

"I'm sure that it was round about here that the Horseless Carriage disappeared," he said, looking hopefully at Bill and Nancy.

"And what would this be, do you think?" Nancy was almost hopping with eagerness.

"I just can't think," confessed Andy. "Can you, Bill?"

"The canvas?—oh, that's just a piece of an old stack cloth, or a wagon cloth. And as for the Horseless Carriage——."

"Good losh alive, you're not going to pretend again that we didn't see that, Bill," broke in Andy. "And we're going on, aren't we? We can't go back without finding out something."

"Of course we're going on," Nancy said promptly. "There's no telling what we shall find. And if we're the first to discover the truth of this old legend——."

"It isn't an old legend," interrupted Bill, in his practical way. Standing there on the marsh road in the moonlight, he twisted the collar of his open-necked shirt between his fingers. "Have you two realised that Mr. Gage was the first and the only one to mention that Horseless Carriage?"

"Golly, yes—I never did like that Mr. Gage. He can be charming—smarmy, my mother calls it——."

"And she writes books!"

"They're jolly good books, Andy Watts. All about birds, and animals, and—oh, bother, we were talking about Mr. Gage. We'd never heard of the Horseless Carriage, had we, Bill?"

"And no one else in the village, so far as I know."

Andy wrinkled his nose thoughtfully.

"Mr. Gage seemed eager to tell me. And he said that it was all over the village. Of course, I didn't know any different——."

"You wouldn't—you're only a 'foreigner,'" Nancy interrupted scornfully. "Bill and I would have heard if anyone had seen the Horseless Carriage before—or even if they were talking about it. So now what?"

Andy was still rucking the piece of canvas in his hands. Bill was looking worried, as befitting his extra year of experience over his cousin and Nancy. Nancy looked challengingly at the two of them.

"Is it much farther down to Mr. Gage's place?" Andy said then.

"A mile and a half—maybe two miles."

"That's half an hour's walk—I vote we go. He might have seen something. He's on the watch, I know, for these app—app——."

"Apparitions," Nancy said kindly, as Andy floundered with the word. "And I'll bet he's on the watch all right. I think it would pay to watch Mr. Gage."

"And I think that's a silly thing to say, Nancy Bates."

"You would, Bill—you're too slow and stolid for anything. Why does Mr. Gage come and bury himself right on the marshes, with only a snarly old man to look after him? Why does he put a high wire fence round his house? How does he know all about the Horseless Carriage when nobody else in the village has heard about it? Why——."

"Oh, come on, Andy—Nancy will chatter all night. If we're going down to Limpey's Hall we might as well go."

The high bank of clouds had rolled away towards the east now, and the moon rode in the night sky. As the winding marsh road took a wide S bend, close to the earthen sea defence wall, they could hear the soft murmur of the river as it broadened out into the North Sea.

In silence, the three children half walked and half ran along the grass verge skirting the marsh road. There was no sound now, except occasionally the twittering of sleepy reed warblers in the rushes of the ditch, and the barking of a dog on a far-away farm.

They reached where the narrow road took a wide turn. Leading from the bend was an even narrower road, almost a track, away to the right. A gate, new looking, even in the moonlight, was closed across this narrow track.

"That was one of the first things Mr. Gage did," Nancy said disgustedly. "Put a gate across the road which leads to Limpey's Hall. As if there were any stock to steal or crops to spoil! My mother says there hasn't been a gate here for simply ages, and——."

"Your mother hasn't lived here for more than three years," Bill broke in mildly.

"Well, she reads, doesn't she? And studies the old records? And—huh, I'll bet she knows more about Bardwell and the marshes just by reading the old parish registers than folks do who've lived here all their lives. A silly gate isn't going to keep us away, is it?"

"Not likely," Andy said. He felt for the catch. "Locked, eh?"

"Of course. Mr. Gage would—why, look!"

Nancy just breathed the last words, as she picked from the closed hinge of the gate another jagged square of canvas. Bill shone his torch again, and then he rubbed his tow-coloured hair bewilderedly.

"It's another piece of wagon cloth, all right," he mumbled. "But—but——."

"I'll bet it's something to do with the Horseless Carriage, anyway," Andy broke in excitedly.

"And if it is, it came through this gate, and caught on the hinge."

"A ghostly carriage wouldn't need a canvas cloth to keep it dry, would it, Nancy?" Bill said witheringly. "It's just a coincidence, finding this, and——."

"But it all points to Limpey's Hall, doesn't it? And that's where we're jolly well going."

To suit her words, Nancy clambered over the gate. The two lads followed. Andy was excited now, as he followed the others along the track towards Limpey's Hall, which stood out bleak and gaunt against the flat marshes.

This was an adventure indeed, and a mystery too. He had seen the Horseless Carriage, and before anyone else in the village, apparently, and, somehow or other, he was convinced that these two scraps of canvas had something to do with the ghostly vehicle. As for Nancy's suspicions of Mr. Evelyn Gage——.

Andy wrinkled up his nose, as he thought of that.

'Smarmy' was the word Nancy had used to describe the owner of Limpey's Hall, and Andy grinned a little as he realised how true a description it was. Mr. Gage had seemed a little too charming to be true. Andy remembered, too, that steely glint which had come to his slatey-grey eyes, when he had bumped the suitcase into him for the second time, and although that amiable smile had soon returned, the mask had been dropped for a moment.

He gave a little laugh then, at the extent of his imagination, and Nancy gave him a dig in the ribs with her elbow.

"What are you laughing about, Andy?"

"Thoughts."

"Huh, that's a daft thing, to laugh at yourself. If I were a boy——."

"I was just thinking that about an hour ago I thought Mr. Gage was a nice old gentleman, and now I'm ready to think he might be a crook, a smuggler, or anything. And——."

"And you'd jolly well be right, too. If Mr. Gage——uh——huh. Here's old Cheery-Face himself, at the gate."

They had almost reached the high, white gates which led to the gravelled drive of Limpey's Hall. Stretched on either side was a seven foot fence of close wire mesh, which gleamed in the moonlight. A few stunted shrubs cast shadows over the garden in front of the house, which was built T-shaped, the base being one-storeyed out-houses and a kitchen, and which, when the house had been used by the dead and gone farmer, had obviously been quarters for the men who worked on his land.

Andy was looking at the man who approached from the other side of the gate, however.

One shoulder was drooped downwards, as if to get away from the lean, vicious face, which looked sallow in the moonlight. A wisp of oily black hair hung over his low forehead. His eyes were dark caverns. He came to the gate, and peered through malevolently.

"You can clear orf. An' now. Before you gets hurt," he snarled, and his lips were twisted as if he meant every word he said.

Nancy gave a loud, indignant snort of disgust. Bill shuffled the gravelled drive with his foot. Andy didn't quite know what to do, so he thrust his hands in his pockets and gave a defiant little whistle.

"An' shut up that whistle," snapped the man.

"Do you own the air around here as well?" Nancy said stormily. "'Cos I'll tell you, Mr. Blakelock——."

She broke off, because the man unlocked the high white gate, and came through, all in a dreadful silence which frightened the three children. He was an unnerving sight as he stood there, scowling, the arm from his drooped shoulder hanging low.

"Are you clearin' orf?"

"We're not doing any harm," Bill said diplomatically.

"And we're not trespassing on your ground, not until we walk inside that gate——."

"Clear orf." Mr. Blakelock seemed to be a man of fixed ideas and few words.

"And I'd like to know why you have to roam around your grounds at well past midnight, as if you're scared of something," Nancy said suspiciously. "And putting up high wire fences——."

She ended with a gasp, for the man gave her a vicious push. Nancy tumbled down, sprawling, and Andy and Bill both doubled their fists.

"I'll help you, Bill and Andy," shouted Nancy, scrambling up, her eyes alive with battle. "If he thinks he can do that to me——."

"Now—now, what is all this?" came a mild voice from beyond the gate, and the children dropped their hands, as Mr. Evelyn Gage came through, his white hair like a halo in the light of the moon.

"Pack o' kids," snarled the man. "Snoopin' around. I'm goin' to clear 'em orf."

"You certainly are not, Blakelock. They're friends of mine—great friends of mine. You can go."

The man scowled. The dark eyes in their great caverns seemed to gleam. Then his hands drooped down, and he shambled off, back towards the house, and Mr. Gage gave a low, rueful laugh.

"That man Blakelock—sometimes I wonder why I keep him," he sighed. "He's fixed with the idea that no one should come near Limpey's Hall. But if I dismissed him, who would I get to cook so well?"

"I should think he'd poison anything he touches," Nancy said scornfully.

"But no—his cooking, it is wonderful. His noodle soup. And his birds-nest soup——."

"You don't have Chinese food like that down here on the marshes, do you, Mr. Gage?"

"We have all the ingredients sent down, young—ah, yes, Andy. Andy Watts." Then Mr. Gage's smile vanished, and he looked sternly at the three children. "I'm sure that you three shouldn't be out at this time of night. Or rather morning. It's past one o'clock."

"We saw the Horseless Carriage, Mr. Gage," Andy said, with more than a little pride.

"Andy and me," Nancy said quickly. "And it came this way, through your gate at the top of the chase, and——."

"Through the gate at the top—how do you know that, child? How do you know——?" Mr. Gage stopped, and smoothed his mane of white hair. "Well—well, I—I'm getting upset myself. I saw that Horseless Carriage, you see—it was almost unnerving."

Nancy gave a little sniff. Bill and Andy fidgeted about. To all three of them, that first little outburst of Mr. Gage's had been very strange.

"Did it seem to float along the ground? Did it—but I'm lacking in hospitality, am I not? Is it too late for you to come in for a cup of coffee, or a glass of lemonade?"

"I—I think——."

"But you must. It will give me the chance to make up for Blakelock's rudeness."

He caught Andy and Nancy by the arm, and led the way up the winding gravelled drive towards the house, entering it by a door in the low buildings. He took them through what was obviously a kitchen, and into the main part of the house.

"I was just going to have a cup of coffee myself, so it's almost ready," he beamed, and he went over to a little spirit stove and percolator set on a brass Benares

table while the children looked around, rather self-consciously.

There didn't seem to be anything sinister about Limpey's Hall, thought Andy, rather disappointedly.

Of course it was rather thrilling to be in this old house, at this time of the night, but it was just like any other well-kept house. Some gay, Chinese shawls hung from the walls. The furniture was solid looking and good. Turning his eyes back to Mr. Gage, Andy noticed a bright, yellow stain on the elbow of his tweed jacket.

"You look as if you've been painting, Mr. Gage," he said politely, and one of the cups which the man was setting out on a tray dropped with a crash.

"Paint? Paint? I—oh, how foolish of me, dropping that cup." The sharpness was gone from Mr. Gage's voice in a moment. "And—paint, you said, young Andy."

"On your elbow, sir. Yellow paint."

"Ah, yes." He pulled the sleeve of his jacket round. "That Blakelock—he's always painting the outhouses somewhere or other. Plenty of sugar in your coffee, all of you?"

He brought the tray over, and smiled at them.

"Now this is cosy—and such a treat for me. And you've been trailing the Horseless Carriage? That's exciting." He looked at Nancy. "But I can't think why you thought it came this way. When I saw it, it seemed to be floating over towards Mosale Farm, on the Northminster marshes."

"Well, we found," began Andy, and then felt Nancy's elbow digging in his ribs again.

"You were going to say, Andy——?"

"N—nothing, Mr. Gage."

"We found an old torn piece of canvas, along the marsh road," said Bill, who wasn't close enough to be

warned by Nancy's elbow. "And another piece caught in the hinge of the gate leading here to Limpey's."

"A piece of canvas? Let me see." He put out his hand for the torn fragments, examined them, and then looked puzzledly at the children. "They don't mean anything to me. Do they you?"

"W—well——."

"Young Andy will have an idea, I'm sure."

Andy wriggled on his seat. "I haven't, Mr. Gage. Except that—well, I jolly well know there was a Horseless Carriage."

Mr. Evelyn Gage smiled.

"I almost convinced myself of that. The folks in the village will be more frightened than ever, I'm sure. And then—well, I wondered if it could be a sort of mirage. Moon shining on the marsh mists—that sort of thing. Do you think it could be that?"

"It wasn't any mirage that I saw," Nancy said, in her direct way.

"Nor me. It was real enough, Mr. Gage. I—I suppose we ought to be getting home now, Bill?"

"No more coffee?" beamed the owner of Limpey's Hall. "Surely you can drink another cup!"

"No thank you Mr. Gage," said Bill, "we really ought to be going"

"Ah well!" sighed Mr. Gage, "I suppose you ought. I do hope your parents haven't noticed that you're missing."

He accompanied them down the drive, and out to the gate. The man Blakelock hadn't been seen any more, and almost the last words of Mr. Gage were to apologise for his man.

"You mustn't judge Limpey's Hall by my man Blakelock, or you would think it a sinister place indeed," he said. "And I'm relying on you to keep a look-out for the

Horseless Carriage. And—," he paused; "don't say too much about it. We don't want to alarm the village."

The goodnights were said, and the three children half ran down the narrow track to the marsh road again. Once at the new white gate, however, Nancy stopped, and rounded on her two companions.

"Well, and now what do you think of your precious Mr. Gage?" she said triumphantly.

"Oh, he was all right," Bill said mildly. "It was his man Blakelock who——."

"But don't you think that just shows how cunning Mr. Gage is?" interrupted the red-haired girl. "That man keeps folks away from Limpey's Hall—and Mr. Gage always has someone to blame. It's 'my man Blakelock this, and my man Blakelock that'—oh, yes, he's clever all right." She stopped for an effect. "I should never be surprised what happens at Limpey's Hall."

"You're talking through your hat, Nancy."

"Oh, am I, Bill Goodey? Did you see how startled he looked, when I said that the Horseless Carriage came through this very gate? And did you see—oh, and that reminds me, Bill. You let the cat out of the bag."

"How?"

"You boys!" the girl sighed. "I had to stop Andy. And then you blurted out about those canvas shreds."

"As if they're important," Bill answered scornfully. "Mr. Gage didn't even know what they were."

"So he said, Bill, so he said. There's something mysterious going on, my lads. Mr. Gage told Andy first about the Horseless Carriage—and now he's telling us to say nothing, for fear of alarming the Bardwell folks. And another thing—that yellow paint on his sleeve."

"He looked startled when I mentioned that," Andy said, wrinkling up his nose.

"He even broke a cup, he was so startled." Nancy shook her mane of wild red hair. "We haven't wasted our time, I'm sure. There's something fishy going on, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Have it your own way, Hans," grinned Bill. "I'm sleepy, anyway. Let's get home."

They clambered over the gate, and in silence walked back along the grass verge of the marsh road.

Andy was certainly sleepy as well. Such a lot had seemed to happen, since he first saw that eerie apparition. And, although Bill poured scorn on Nancy's suspicions, Andy was now almost convinced that Mr. Evelyn Gage was not all that he professed to be.

He sighed.

He did wish that there had been something in the house, apart from Blakelock, which looked really sinister. Andy loved that word. If there had been a fearsome Chinese screen with dragons to hide a secret door, or if—huh, but he was foolish to think such things. Really sinister things never appeared on the surface. And if Mr. Gage had anything to hide—and Andy couldn't think what it could be—then the owner of Limpey's Hall would be bland and genial to everyone.

Andy yawned.

Good losh alive, he was sleepy. He'd be glad to get into bed again. A minute or two later, however, he found that the adventures of the night were not yet over.

The three were some distance down the marsh road when Nancy suddenly stopped, and clutched at their arms.

"Shush—listen."

Andy and Bill listened, their hearts hammering at the quiet urgency in the girl's voice.

"I—I can't hear anything," mumbled Bill. "You startled me, Nancy. If you can't——."

"There—now listen."

They could hear it now, the soft swish of the short marsh grass, and a sobbing, despairing breath. The moon was low now, half hidden by the scud of clouds. The three children crowded together, lips parted, afraid of this half-human, half-animal noise which came out of the night.

There was a little torn-off cry then, a splash of water, as someone or something jumped the ditch, quite close to them. There was the sound of quick, shambling footsteps, the sob of distressed breathing, and then some dim figure brushed past them, with feet shambling in the dust of the road.

Bill fumbled for his torch and switched it on. The beam cut a lane in the darkness, and spot-lighted on a bent figure which suddenly leaped the ditch on the other side of the road. For a moment a white, harassed face glared back, and then the figure was out of the radius of the torch, and lost to sight on the dark marshes.

"Good losh alive," mumbled Andy.

"It—it was a man, wasn't it?" chattered Nancy. "I thought—Bill, what's wrong? You're shaking. Did you——?"

"D—didn't you see who that was?" muttered Bill, in a low voice.

"The torch was only on him for a moment. Was it Blakelock? Or Mr. Gage himself? Or——."

"I—I couldn't have been mistaken." Bill in his bewilderment was twisting his tow-coloured hair between his fingers now. "I s-saw his face, as he turned round. It was Larry—my brother Larry. And he's supposed to be in London, and he's here, running away from something as—as if he's scared out of his very life."



CHAPTER IV

LARRY COMES HOME

BILL stood for a moment like one stunned. Even the excitable Nancy didn't know what to do, or say, just then, and she clutched hold of Bill's arm, and then released it, suddenly. Andy drew a deep breath.

"I—I don't remember Larry, not much——."

"I'm sure it was Larry," Bill muttered again.

"But you could easily be mistaken, Bill," Nancy said hurriedly. "I mean, he is in London, and if he was here he'd have come home, and——."

"Is it any good trying to catch him across the marshes," Andy put in eagerly.

"We'd never find him now."

Bill slipped the torch in his pocket again. As always when he was trying to think, his fingers strayed up to twist his untidy strands of hair.

"He was scared, wasn't he? Breathless, and—and

sobbing, as if he—he'd been running a long way, and—Nancy, Andy, it was Larry," he said again, as if to convince himself.

"Where could he have been running from?"

"From Limpey's Hall, of course, silly," Nancy said promptly. "Yes, that's what it is, I'm sure. Mr. Gage has been keeping him a prisoner, and——."

"What on earth for?"

"Oh, I—I don't know," confessed the girl ruefully. "Or perhaps he came from a boat up the river. Yes, that'd be it, Bill. He escaped from the boat, and there was someone after him, perhaps, and—oh, I don't know." At this time of night, Nancy found it hard to pursue her own imagination. "Perhaps it wasn't Larry, anyway."

"It was."

A little silence fell between them. A few moments before they had been so very excited, but now that the mystery threatened to touch one of them, the others were worried and uncertain. Both Nancy and Andy knew how Bill's mother fretted so much because she had heard nothing of Larry. If she knew that he had been running across the marshes like a hunted thing——.

"We mustn't let my mother know about this," said Bill, as if he could read their thoughts.

"I wouldn't dare let my mother know I've been roaming round the marshes so late at night, anyway."

"She'd worry even more. My mother, I mean, about Larry. Although——."

"Do you think Larry might be going home, Bill?" suggested Andy.

"He looked," answered Bill soberly; "as if he didn't know where he was running. But we mustn't say a word."

"I still think Mr. Gage is mixed up in it all, somehow or other."

"You would, Nancy—just get one idea in your head, and it'll stick. We'll get home, anyway. We can't do any good standing here."

They almost ran up the marsh road now. The night adventure had lost a little of its thrill. The warm-hearted, impulsive Nancy stole a look at the worried face of Bill, and she slipped her hand through his arm, when they were near Kiney Cottage.

"Don't forget, Bill. You mustn't tell your mother."

"As if I would!"

"And—and I don't think it could have been Larry, anyway," went on the girl. "How could you tell, in that light, Bill?"

Bill didn't answer. He wasn't really sure himself, but the conviction that it was his elder brother was growing on him. Andy didn't say anything. He was too confused.

"I think we ought to go to the police," Nancy went on, and she looked at the pair of them challengingly.

"I'm all for that, but——."

"Andy—Nancy, be sensible. What could we tell the police?"

"That Mr. Evelyn Gage—ugh, how I hate that name—is a smarmy old man up to some mischief, and——."

"What sort of mischief? The police are only interested in crime."

"Oh, you always argue, Bill Goodey," said the girl in exasperation. "He—he looks a criminal, doesn't he? And that smooth, soft voice of his—huh! Everything points to something fishy at Limpeys. The high fence, the ugly gargoyle of a Blakelock, that smear of paint on Mr. Gage's elbow, that he was so alarmed about, and——."

"Added up, they mean nothing at all," mumbled Bill.

"And Larry—if it was Larry—running across the marshes like a hunted animal!"

"Maybe, if—if it was Larry, he was on his way home. Perhaps he's home by now," Andy said eagerly, and Bill's gloomy face lighted up a little.

"Bill, if he is, just flash a light from your window," Nancy said excitedly. "I—I'll keep awake to watch for it." She gave a wide yawn. "If I can," she added. "I'm going in now."

She said goodnight to Bill and Andy, and slipped quietly along the grass edged path into Kiney Cottage. The two boys reached the farmhouse, and climbed up to Bill's bedroom. His little clock said ten minutes to two.

"There isn't a sound," whispered Bill. "Mother would have been up, bustling about to get a meal if Larry had come home."

"Maybe he's crept up to his room without waking anyone. Would—would he do that, Bill?"

Bill shook his head, but on stockinged feet he tip-toed along the landing. He came back within a few minutes, his eyes still clouded, and shaking his head.

"He isn't there."

"Then it wasn't Larry," Andy said stoutly.

Bill sat wearily on the edge of his bed. "Andy, it was. I've had a chance to think since. I know I only caught just a glimpse of his face, and it was dark, but—Andy—I remember now. The way he ran. It—it was Larry."

"How could you tell by the way he ran, Bill?" mumbled Andy.

"We always used to chip old Larry about his running—he used to lurch forward, as if he was overbalancing." Bill drew a deep breath. "The man who ran across the marsh tonight ran like that. I remember plainly now." He kicked his slippers from his feet. "Mother mustn't know," he added bleakly.

Andy went along to his own room then, and undressed

in the dark, for the moon was gone now, and crept in between the sheets.

His eyes were rimmed with hot pin points of fatigue, but he couldn't sleep. So much had happened, since he had come down on the train with Mr. Evelyn Gage.

He remembered again that cruel glint which had come to Mr. Gage's eyes, just for that moment or two, in the railway carriage, and he wondered if Nancy's intuition was right. Of course a man could be annoyed, bumped right and left by a heavy suit case, but that didn't make him a criminal. But——.

Andy moved restlessly in bed.

But Mr. Gage had been the first to mention the Horseless Carriage. No one on the marshes had heard about it before—and, the same night, the phantom Horseless Carriage had appeared. It was just as if Mr. Gage, knowing Andy would talk about it, had been preparing the superstitious marshmen about an even more grisly apparition than the Headless Dog.

Andy punched at his pillow, and yawned.

Sleep—he wanted to go to sleep. He started to count sheep, and then he found that some had the heavy, lowering face of Blakelock, and some of them smiled like Mr. Gage. And one of them waved its front leg in the air, and Andy saw that it was covered with yellow paint.

He knuckled his eyes sleepily.

Yellow paint. Mr. Gage had been so alarmed when Andy drew his attention to the smear of paint on his elbow. Nothing in that. Yellow paint. But Mr. Gage had dropped his cup, and——.

"Oh, blister Mr. Gage," mumbled Andy.

He closed his eyes tightly, trying to get to sleep, but the Horseless Carriage floated by in his imagination, and then he saw that dim figure which might be Larry

stumbling, panting and distressed, across the marshes, and then everything whirled and twisted in his confused mind, and at last he dropped off to sleep.

. . . . He woke, next morning, to find his Aunt Julia shaking him by the shoulder vigorously.

"Whatever has come over the boys! Andy, now, wake up—wake up. It's nine o'clock."

Andy yawned, knuckled his eyes, and then scrambled sheepishly up in bed, to look into the worried face of his aunt.

"Good losh, I—I'm sleepy. I expect it is the change of air," he added hastily.

"But it isn't that with Bill, and he's as heavy as you. And there's your breakfast spoiling on the stove, Andy. Did you sleep well?"

"I—I——"

"But I can see you did, though," and Andy was thankful for his aunt's habit of never waiting for an answer. "Put your head in some cold water, lad, and hurry down. And make sure Bill comes as well."

The cold water in the ewer freshened Andy. He towelled his face, and his black, wiry hair, dressed, and went along to Bill's room. Bill was giving his tow-coloured hair its first and only combing of the day.

"No more night jaunts for me, Andy Watts."

"It was fun though, wasn't it? Except——."

"Except for Larry." The other lad's face clouded. "Now don't forget, Andy—not a word."

They went down to a breakfast which Mrs. Goodey had kept hot, in between feeding the flock of chickens, and cooling the milk which came in from the cow-sheds. There was a beaker of fresh, foaming milk for Andy and Bill, and a mountain of fried potatoes, and bacon which had been cured in the farmhouse, and then toast to follow.

Uncle Daniel came in for a cup of tea. His sleeves were rolled well up his scorched arms, and the open shirt at his thick neck made a red V where the sun in the harvest field had burned him.

"It's going to be a fair scorcher today, I can tell you," he said, after he had finished his second huge cup of tea. "A little bit of ground mist s'mornin', an' that's a rare sign. Yes, an' Julia—we had a tramp sleepin' in the barn last night."

"I thought I heard old Mick barking."

Andy and Bill exchanged quick glances. Aunt Julia caught them—she had never quite lost her school-mistress sharpness—and looked at them suspiciously.

"Laid right down on the straw in the barn, he did—I wished I'd have caught him s'mornin', but he was gone."

"And if you'd caught him you'd have got me to give him a good breakfast and sent him off with half a crown—I know you, Daniel Goodey," Aunt Julia said with a rare smile. "What were you two lads looking so guilty about, just now?"

"Mum——."

"Aunt Julia——."

"You were out and about last night, or I'll miss my guess. Sleeping so heavily like that this morning—it just isn't natural, not for my Bill. Did you see anything of a tramp about?"

"We saw the Horseless Carriage, and——."

Andy stopped, realising that his Aunt Julia had almost made him say that.

"Did you hear that, Daniel? I thought I'd get it out of them. Horseless Carriage—fiddlesticks. There isn't such a thing."

Uncle Daniel pulled at the lobe of his ear.

"I wouldn't like to say that, Julia. The men on the farm won't come down here on the marshes, come dark of night."

"Just fiddlesticks," Aunt Julia said vigorously. "And don't you let me hear any more talk of it, Bill and Andy. Horseless Carriage—faugh. Get out in the sun, you boys—we want to see Andy nice and brown, when the time comes for him to go back."

Bill and Andy were glad enough to escape, before Mrs. Goodey asked any more questions. Andy was quite sure that his Aunt Julia would worm from him anything she wanted, and he didn't want to distress her with the news about Larry.

There was no sign of Nancy. The boys went down into the harvest field, and there, for a time, forgot the mysteries which had happened on the marsh.

Andy was excited over the harvest scene. It was the first time he had seen a self-binder at work, and it fascinated him, to see the whirring blades beat down the ripe corn to the sharp knives below, to watch the cut corn gathered up on the wide roller, to be tied automatically into sheaves, and dropped out on the other side.

He even had a ride on the tractor which pulled the self-binder, too, and felt very important indeed as the brown-tanned driver allowed him to sit behind the wheel. Round and round the waving, golden corn went the tractor, with the self-binder cutting a broad swathe, and the little rabbits scurrying for shelter as the corn stalks grew less and less.

For Andy it was a new experience.

For Bill and Nancy, who came into the field later, the harvesting was no novelty. They helped with stooking up the corn, however, and when Andy, shaken a little by the rattle of the tractor, jumped down thankfully to take

a drink from the lemonade bottle, Nancy clutched him by the arm.

"Here's the villain of the piece," she hissed.

"The villain of—oh, Mr. Gage. You are an ass, Ginger. As if——."

Andy let out a yelp, as Nancy pushed him violently into a stook of corn. A long thistle scratched his leg.

"And if you want any more, Andy Watts——."

"Of all the—oh, I remember. I called you Ginger, didn't I? I forgot."

"Well, if you really did forget——?"

"Honest. You're not ginger—you're just a good Red-Head." Nancy didn't seem to be quite satisfied with that, and Andy went on quickly. "What is Mr. Gage doing?"

"Oh, he brings cigarettes and bottles of beer for the harvest men—it's just his smarmy way of getting round them," she sniffed.

"The men like it, anyway," grinned Bill.

"And I'll bet he's telling them about the Horseless Carriage, just to scare 'em. Although he told us not to say a word or—shush, here he comes."

Mr. Evelyn Gage came across the cut stubble, a smile on his lean, yellowish face.

"And there are no after effects, you young adventurers, over the night's work?"

"We just slept late, that's all, Mr. Gage."

"And we saw——." Nancy broke off, and screwed up her face in disgust.

"Well, what did you see, Nancy? A Carriage-less Horse, this time?"

"A man. Running across the marshes." Nancy was sulky now. "He—he looked as if he was scared."

"A man, eh?" Mr. Gage smoothed his white hair.

"You do run into things, don't you? Perhaps it was a poacher?"

"He wouldn't go scaring across the marshes as if a couple of—of devils were after him, would he," snorted Nancy. "'Cos this man was really frightened, and distressed, and—oh, he was scared, anyway," she ended lamely.

"I expect he had seen our ghostly visitor without wheels as well, don't you?" smiled Mr. Gage. "But I must be off. I'll be expecting to see you again soon."

He went off, across the stubble, and through the gate. The harvest men were sitting on a stook for the eleven o'clock break, eating bread and cheese and drinking the bottled ale which Mr. Gage had brought.

"It ain't jest that gurt old dawg with no head now, that it aint'——."

"An owd kerridge that doan need no hoss to draw it—an lit up like a ghostie," said one grey whiskered old harvester in awe.

"You woulden ketch me along that marsh road at night—not nohow," mumbled the brown-faced young tractor driver, and he swallowed a big chunk of bread, and then choked.

Nancy looked at Andy and Bill, and then led the way down the field.

"Doesn't that just show? Didn't I say it was just an excuse of Mr. Smarmy Gage, bringing the ale for the men? He's trying to scare them again."

"Well, if they'd seen the Horseless Carriage they'd be scared even more," mumbled Andy, shivering a little as he remembered the ghostly sight in the moonlight.

"And Mr. Gage is going to make quite sure they are scared, even if they don't see it."

"I'm beginning to think you're right, Nancy."

"Of course I'm right, Andy. Bill——."

"I wouldn't care if you were right or wrong, so long as I knew something about Larry. I—I bet it was Larry who slept in the barn last night."

A little cloud came over them. Andy thought of his Aunt Julia's distress, if ever she knew that her elder son had been so close, and had not been in to see them all. If it was Larry, then—then there must be something terrible, to keep him from home.

The children filled in the time well that day.

After the big lunch that Aunt Julia prepared, they went into the stackyard, and helped pitch the corn sheaves from the wagons into the elevator, whose long, gleaming tines on a moving chain belt took the sheaves up to the stack which was being built. They rode in the wagons back to the corn field which had been cut a day or two before, and Andy could feel his neck and face and arms burning with the heat of the sun.

The marsh air made him tired, before night. Or perhaps, he thought, it was his broken sleep the night before.

Even in the late evening there was plenty to do. The ducks were to drive in from the horse pond and to lock up, the chicken houses to secure, the cows to drive out to pasture. Aunt Julia who always seemed to be working, had cooked a huge pasty for supper, and they were all seated round the table when Mick growled outside.

"Maybe it's that tramp again—I'll see," Uncle Daniel said quickly, but before he could jump up there was a slurring sound across the stone cobbles of the yard. The next moment the door had opened quickly, and a slim, slight figure appeared.

He seemed, then, to brace himself. Andy knew who he was—he saw the pleased, eager look on Aunt Julia's face turn to distress—he saw the young man give a tiny little smile.

"H-hullo, all—I'm back, you see, I-like the prodigal," he mumbled, and then Larry pitched forward, motionless, on the stone floor of the kitchen.

Mr. Goodey's chair overturned with a crash then.

For a minute, none of the others could move or speak.

Larry lay there, motionless, his face as white as the stone floor of the kitchen. Then Aunt Julia almost ran, to kneel down by his still form. The two boys didn't know what to do with themselves, and on Bill's brown, stolid face was a taut, worried expression, like a lad afraid of showing too much emotion.

"Larry. Larry, boy. It's your mother here——."

"He's unconscious, Julia. Here—let me take him."

"Daniel, he—he might have some bones broken. Wait."

Her face harassed with dread, Mrs. Goodey ran her hands over the limp figure of her elder son. Relief showed for a moment in the depths of her eyes as she looked up at her husband.

"He—he seems all right, Daniel," she whispered. "There are no bones broken, I think. But—oh, Daniel, he looks so white, so thin. Daniel——."

"Don't distress yourself, Julia. See, I'll take him upstairs. He'll be better in bed."

With a gentleness strange in so burly a man, Mr. Goodey bent down, lifted Larry in his great arms, and carried him up the stairs. The meal was forgotten now. Mrs. Goodey fussed around, filling hot water bottles, which she took upstairs. The boys pushed their plates away, as the sounds of movement in Larry's room came through the thick oak floor.

"We do know now, Bill," Andy said slowly. "It was Larry we saw last night. Did you see, Bill? His trouser legs—they'd been soaked through, and then rough dried,

in the sun. He plunged through that ditch, remember?"

Bill nodded gloomily.

"But that doesn't explain what he was running away from, Andy. Or why he didn't come home last night."

Andy traced a pattern on the table cloth with the prongs of his fork.

"Maybe Nancy was right. Maybe he was running away from Limpey's Hall."

"Why should he be?" Bill said bleakly.

"I—I don't know. But I'm trusting Nancy, with that—what d'you call it?—intuition of hers. Larry was scared last night."

"But that doesn't explain why he was afraid to come home, or——."

"What's that, young Bill?"

Uncle Daniel had taken off his heavy boots upstairs, when he undressed Larry and put him to bed, and the boys hadn't heard him come down the stairs again. They looked at each other awkwardly, and Uncle Daniel ran his hands through his greying hair.

"Well, come on, what were you saying about Larry?"

"H-how is he, dad?" Bill asked quickly.

Mr. Goodey heaved a deep breath. "He just came to for a bit, and grinned—you know that old grin of his, lad?—an' said he didn't like being a bother. What were you saying about Larry, you boys?"

Bill shuffled his feet.

"We-el, we didn't mean to tell anyone, for fear of worrying mum, but——."

He broke off quickly, and there was an uncomfortable silence, as his mother came down the stairs. Her fine eyes were worried, and her lips were tight, as she looked sharply at the three of them. Somehow she seemed to

sense that they were keeping something back from her and her voice was sharp when she spoke.

"Well, what is it?" she demanded. "You broke off talking, when I came down. Bill, did you know about Larry?"

"I—I——."

"But I don't see how you could," went on his mother, saving Bill by her own concern. "He's come a long way this night, and he's fair done for, and distressed. A bowl of good gruel, that's what he needs, and a lacing of brandy in it. Daniel——."

"I'll get the brandy."

The two boys were alone again. They didn't know what to do, or say. Mrs. Goodey was bustling about, and then she went up again, with the brandy-laced gruel, and Uncle Daniel came quietly into the kitchen once more.

"What were you going to tell me, young Bill?"

"I—I think we saw Larry, last night. Running across the marshes. And he was frightened then, and panting, as if——."

"Last night? Maybe it was Larry who slept in the barn?"

"Th-that's what we thought, Uncle Daniel."

"Then why didn't he come home last night? An' what's he been doin' today—hidin'?" The big, red face of Mr. Goodey was perturbed. "An' what would he be hidin' from—tell me that?"

Andy and Bill couldn't answer that. Andy had a wild thought that somehow it was all mixed up with the Horseless Carriage which haunted the sleeping marshes, but of course the stolid Uncle Daniel wouldn't believe that.

"We mustn't mention it to mother, see? She's worried

enough as it is. An' in good time young Larry'll tell us, maybe. Perhaps you youngsters ought to be getting up to bed now."

The two boys said goodnight, and would have gone straight to their rooms, but Mrs. Goodey called them softly from the door at the end of the landing.

"Larry wants to see you, Bill. And you too, Andy."

She went down the stairs again, and Bill and Andy went a little shyly into the bedroom. Larry, in a suit of clean pyjamas, was sitting up in bed. His lean face was hollowed and white, his dark hair tumbled in damp waves above a high forehead. Andy noticed that the hunted look was still in his eyes. He managed a faint smile at the two boys, however.

"Hello, Bill. Been looking after mother for me, have you?" he said weakly. "'Lo there, young Andy. My, you're growing. A—fine big cousin you'll think I am, flopping out like this."

They moved nearer to the bed, the question on both their minds peeping from their eyes.

"W—we're glad to have you back, Larry," mumbled Bill awkwardly.

"How's old Blossom? Does she still stamp, when you try to put the collar over her neck?" A tinge of colour came to Larry's pale cheeks. "And Mick—I've missed old Mick——."

"We're hoping you're home for good now, Larry."

Larry seemed to be looking through Bill, at something frightening beyond.

"Larry, we—we were out on the marsh last night," went on Bill awkwardly. "We haven't told mother. And we thought—Larry, we're only trying to help——."

"What did you think, Bill?"

Bill gulped. "We thought we saw you, running

across the marshes as—as if you were scared, and——.”

He broke off, because Larry leaned back on the pillow, his face white again, his eyes closed. His mother came hurrying into the room, and clicked her tongue.

“I shouldn’t have let you boys come in,” she fretted. “Are you all right, Larry?”

“I—I’m all right.” He didn’t open his eyes, however. “Didn’t you tell Bill, mother, that I—I hadn’t enough money for the full rail journey, and—and walked from Woolham Ferrers?”

“I haven’t had time for anything yet. Larry, why?”

“Nothing—nothing at all.” He opened his eyes, and smiled faintly at the two boys. “Y-you see, Bill. Don’t ever be an artist—you’ve never enough money to get home.”

“Now just you go off to sleep, Larry,” his mother said firmly. “I’ll have Doctor Barrett in to you, first thing in the morning.”

The hunted look came back to Larry’s dark eyes, and he leaned wearily back on the pillow. His mother smoothed back his dark hair, and then motioned for the two boys to leave. After they had gone, she placed a chair by the side of the bed and sat quietly watching her elder son. She couldn’t think what had happened to him and with her mind a jumble of thoughts she soon fell asleep. Her husband came up soon afterwards and had to shake her hard before he could waken her. Most reluctantly and with an anxious last minute glance at the sleeping Larry she left the room and went to bed. Meanwhile Andy and Bill had wandered along to Andy’s bedroom where they sat facing each other in silence.

Bill began twisting his wisps of tow-coloured hair and Andy was the first to speak.

“What do you think of it, Bill?” he whispered.

“I—I don’t think Larry was speaking the truth,” Bill

said miserably. "He didn't sound as if he was, and he looked scared, when I said I thought it was him running across the marshes last night."

"I don't mean that," Andy said impatiently. "Didn't you notice his clothes?"

Bill looked bewildered, as he shook his head.

"On the knee of his trousers," Andy said, dramatically, "was a smear of yellow paint."

"Y-yellow paint."

"I went close to make sure. It was dried hard." He paused, to get his effect. "It was the same sort of yellow paint that was on Mr. Gage's sleeve."

Without a word, Bill went out, and along the passage to Larry's room again. When he came back, his face was set grimly.

"I always like to make sure," he said. "It is paint, and it is the same as Mr. Gage had on his sleeve, and—."

"Didn't I tell you so. What do we do now?"

Bill thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

"I—I don't know."

"Nancy is right, and we should go to the police," Andy said eagerly. "That smear of paint links Larry up with Mr. Gage. And Larry was hunted across those marshes——."

"But he's home now, isn't he?" Bill put in, in his stolid way.

"Ye-es, but——."

"And if there is anything wrong he'll tell us tomorrow, won't he?"

Andy was exasperated. When he had found a good and thrilling mystery, Bill dashed it with his stolid common sense.

"I don't put much on that paint, anyway," Bill went on. "Mr. Gage said that his man Blakelock had been

painting up the outbuildings. Perhaps Larry blundered past some wet paint, in the darkness——."

"Larry wouldn't be right down at Limpeys, would he? Surely he knows the way home?"

"W-well, he—he was all in, wasn't he? Perhaps he was wandering, and didn't know where he was." Bill started to undress slowly. "Maybe that's how it was, Andy. We'll know in the morning, anyway. P-perhaps Larry will explain everything then."

He said goodnight, and went along to his own room, undressing as he went. It was a long time before Andy again went off to sleep.

There was a dark mystery here on Bardwell marshes, and Larry was mixed up in it, somehow or other.

Larry, who had gone up to London to study art, who hadn't written home for weeks, and who had run across the marshes like a frightened man, to arrive home, distressed, exhausted, the next evening.

The Horseless Carriage was mixed up in it, too—Andy was quite sure of that. And Mr. Evelyn Gage, and the surly looking Blakelock.

He didn't quite know how, or why, but somehow or other they all combined to make a first-class mystery.

Andy woke once in the night, and heard Mick give a low growl in the yard below. He wasn't quite sure what time it was, but there was a raucous chorus from the cockerels a few minutes afterwards, so he guessed that it was nearly dawn. He went off to sleep again, to be awakened by Bill, when the morning sun was pitching into the bedroom.

He knuckled his eyes, and raised himself in bed.

"You're dressed early, Bill," he said then, in surprise. "Have you seen how Larry is this morning?"

"H-he isn't here."

"Isn't here?" Andy was wide awake now. "But—Bill, I heard old Mick growl last night. I never thought——."

"I expect that was when Larry was leaving. He left a note for mother. He—he told her that he'd be all right, that she's not to worry at all, b-but of course she is. And he's gone—just vanished. I can't think why he ever came home at all, to clear off again so suddenly."

Breakfast was a silent meal that morning.

Aunt Julia could eat nothing at all, but she didn't overlook the needs of the others, although Andy felt as if every mouthful choked him. Uncle Daniel swallowed several cups of tea.

"He wasn't fit to leave," Aunt Julia suddenly burst out. "Daniel, after the way he collapsed last night—I should have stayed with him all night."

"He came round soon enough, lass. Perhaps he's stronger than you thought he was. Although——."

"With that white, peaked face, as if he hadn't had any good food for months—not likely," Aunt Julia said worriedly. "Did you ever see our boy like that, Daniel? London—faugh! He hasn't earned enough with his painting to keep him in buns!"

She poured out some more tea, and was so agitated that she slopped it all over the white tablecloth.

"And why did he want to leave? Just writing that note to us and leaving it in his bedroom, and—and sneaking out, like a thief——."

"Perhaps he was just too proud to stop, lass. Yes, that's it, I reckon. He aimed to make a go of his painting in London, an' he's gone back to have another try."

"Couldn't he have got himself fit and well before he went back? 'Tisn't that, and you know it, Daniel Goodey. There's something more behind it all."

Uncle Daniel gave the boys a warning look, and they were glad to escape into the morning sun. Bill's father followed them out across the cobbled yard.

"Now don't forget, you youngsters, no talkin' about thinkin' it was Larry harin' across the marshes," he said anxiously to them. "Your mother, Bill, has got plenty enough on her mind just now."

The boys had, as well. Nancy came up the chase, and she had to be told all about it, as they wandered moodily across the coarse grass of the marsh.

"It's just like I said, and we've got to follow and watch Mr. Smarmy Gage," she said excitedly. "And I forgot to tell you fellows——."

"Forgot to tell us what?" Andy demanded, as the girl broke off.

"Nothing. That's my secret," Nancy said calmly. "You'd only laugh if I told you, and perhaps I'll have the laugh of you. Is your mother very worried, Bill? Can I go and give her a hand in the house?"

"I reckon mother feels better while she's working. A fat lot you could help, anyway."

"Bill Goodey, I can cook, and clean up, and——."

"Of course you can cook," Andy broke in soothingly. "Don't let your hair get the better of you, Nancy. We're talking about Larry, anyway. If we could only know why——."

His voice trailed away. They had reached the bank of one of the wide marsh ditches now, and his sharp eyes noticed that the long couch grass at the side of the ditch was flattened out. He suddenly darted ahead, and picked up something half hidden on the bank.

"Bill—look," he said excitedly. "This is Larry's tie—I remember seeing it last night. It's a reddish check——."

"It's Larry's all right."

Bill's blue eyes were frightened now. He looked at the flattened grass, which had all the signs of a violent struggle.

"Andy——?"

"I—I'm jolly well going to say what you're thinking, Bill. Larry slipped that tie in his pocket, when he left this morning. And someone set on him—right here. There's been a struggle—a terrific struggle."

"You're right, Andy—I'm sure you're right," Nancy said soberly.

"We ought to go to the police," Andy said quickly. "Bill, don't you think——."

"Just a minute, I want to think this out."

The stolid Bill was quiet for a minute or two. Andy and Nancy looked at him impatiently. They were all for action.

"What would we tell the police if we went to them?" Bill said then, quietly. "Especially the Bardwell police—there's only one policeman. Larry could have dropped that tie there just accidentally——."

"But if he was going back to London he wouldn't come this way, or——."

"And what else could we tell the police, without worrying mother?" went on Bill quietly. "We know it was Larry on the marshes the night before last. We know that he seemed to be scared—but we can't prove it. And if we could I—I wouldn't want mother to know, to worry herself stiff."

"But—but—oh, well, perhaps you're right, Bill."

"We ought to do something, though," Nancy said vigorously. "Keep an eye on Mr. Gage, and Limpey's Hall, and that miserable old Blakelock."

"I wish I knew what we could do," Bill said miserably.

The children were in no mood to do much, that day.

They helped in the harvest field, and in the afternoon roamed over the marshes, looking for plovers' nests, but a lot of the carefree gaiety was gone. At the back of the minds of all of them was the thought of Larry, and the trouble which had made him disappear again. Just one look at Mrs. Goodey's set, distressed face made the worry come back to their minds again.

It was Andy who, immediately after tea, suggested camping out that night. He had seen a tent of Bill's rolled up in the barn, and the eyes of the other two sparkled when he put the idea.

"Huh, but of course I wouldn't be allowed," Nancy said then, disgustedly. "Unless there's another tent, or——."

"You'd be scared of snakes or beetles if you slept out, silly."

"I've slept out before. In just a sleeping bag on the lawn, and a hedgehog came and—huh, but it's no good talking about that. Mother'd be stuffy about me camping out with you two."

"You could help us pitch the tent, if we can sleep out."

"Well, that's something. And I could come over and cook your supper for you—shall I? I'll be getting out the tent, Bill, while you ask."

Bill came back, pleased and surprised. Yes, he and Andy could pitch the tent and sleep out, so long as they were near to the house. He didn't add that his mother had given her permission in a vague sort of way, as if she didn't quite understand what Bill was asking. It was more than likely that she didn't, anyway. Her mind was still full of Larry.

It was fun, pitching the tent.

It was better fun still, cutting turf from the home meadow to clear a place to build a fire, and lighting it,

although it was still hot in the dusk of that summer evening. Nancy had brought her contributions for supper—a tin of soup, and a lettuce and a cucumber. Bill and Andy had brought bread, butter, cheese and tomatoes.

"Do you think I can cook now," Nancy said challengingly, as they tasted the soup which she ladled out from the saucepan hung over the fire.

"It's burnt," grinned Andy.

"You didn't put any salt in," said Bill.

"If you don't like it I can jolly well eat the lot," the red-haired girl said stormily. "What did you bring to drink, Bill?"

"Milk."

"Well, let's have some, then, and don't keep it all for yourself. Any more soup, Andy?"

"I'll finish up with bread and cheese, if you don't mind," Andy said hastily.

"You don't have to be polite with me, Andy Watts. And I like it, anyway."

Nancy was artful enough to tip her soup on the ground, however, and then unashamedly ate bread and cheese and lettuce and tomatoes. She sighed, as the camp fire leaped up, sending bright fingers of flame into the darkness of the marsh.

"Gosh, if only I could sleep out," she sighed. "Mother just wouldn't hear of it. You're not scared, you two, are you, on your own?"

"Scared? When I suggested camping out just for the very reason of——."

"Uh-huh, I thought so, Andy Watts. Just so that you could keep watch, eh? If you do see that Horseless Carriage again——."

Nancy broke off, as a lurching figure came into the light of the camp-fire, and then passed on into the darkness.

"Now that makes my evening absolutely complete," Nancy said, in a high, clear voice. "That was Cheery-Face Blakelock himself."

"He'll hear you, you fathead."

"Who cares—it's him who's trespassing now. And Bill, Andy—you won't forget, will you?" she asked eagerly. "Come and tell me if you do see anything. I'll be sleeping ever so lightly. Perhaps I won't go to sleep at all. Perhaps I'll just sit by the window——."

"You'll be asleep and dreaming in no time—I know you, Nancy. And you'd better be off now. It's only men who can stay up camping."

There was a bit of a skirmish with the hasty-tempered girl, but at last she went off across the dark marsh to Kiney Cottage. Bill and Andy talked round the fire for another hour. Then they carefully raked out the fire, and crept into the tent under the blankets.

Andy couldn't sleep, however.

It was the first time he had camped out, and the ground felt hard under the blankets. Now and again he heard a rustle in the grass, and thought of weasels and snakes and all kinds of creepy things. Once he heard the bellow of a frightened cow, and it seemed so close that he was startled, and roused the half sleeping Bill.

"Eh? Cows? Lemme alone—they're in the other marsh, and——."

"Listen to them now, Bill. They seem frightened."

"Oh, blow and blister them," mumbled Bill drowsily. "Go to sleep, they'll soon settle down."

He wrapped the blankets more closely round him and closed his eyes.

Andy was still worried and kept listening to the noise which seemed to be getting louder and nearer.

He roused Bill again and after much grumbling and

rubbing of eyes he tumbled from his blankets, and, with Andy, crawled towards the flap of the tent.

The cattle on the marshes were bellowing furiously now. The boys could hear the pounding of their feet on the marsh.

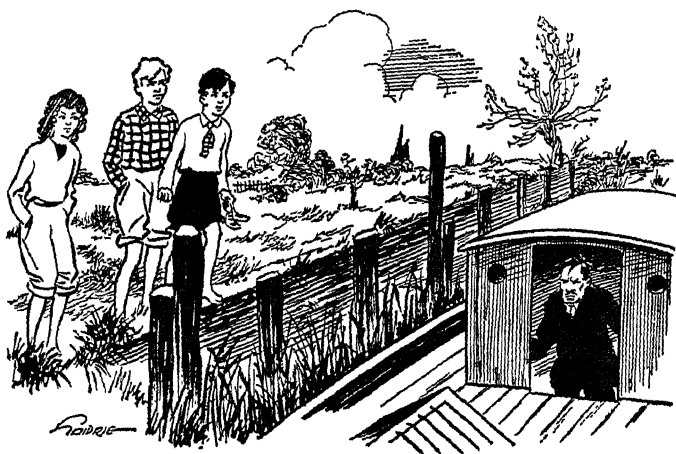
"I can't understand that," Bill muttered. "If there was anything worrying them——."

"Bill, look—look!"

Andy almost screamed the words, as he flung out his hand to point across the dark marshes.

He felt a quiver of real fear in his spine. He was sure that his hair rose up on end.

Across the marshes, loping towards them, was the Headless Dog, huge, gaunt, its long legs and powerful body an eerie, ghostly white in the silent darkness.



CHAPTER V

THE MYSTERIOUS LAUNCH

ANDY felt Bill's hand clutch his arm. For himself he couldn't move, or hardly breathe. He wanted to scream, but no sound came from his dry lips. His back felt as if a dozen cold caterpillars were crawling up it, as the gaunt, luminous body and four legs of a dog loped towards them.

Now they could see it in all its eeriness.

It jumped across the ditch close to them—or perhaps it just flew over, Andy couldn't be sure. He thought he could see the great ribs of it, sticking through its white body. It moved, so silently, so swiftly, like some ghost from the animal world. And then, when it seemed as if it must blunder into the tent and the frightened boys, it swerved, went swiftly across the marsh, and disappeared.

Even then, when the marshes were dark and silent once

more, it was several minutes before either could speak.

"I—I suppose——."

"No, you didn't dream that, Andy." Bill's voice was just as shaky. "I saw it myself. And——."

"It scared me, Bill."

"Me too."

"Good losh alive, if—if Nancy had been here——." Andy broke off, and gave a deep breath. "W-well, we saw it, didn't we?" he mumbled, just because he didn't know what else to say. "The Headless Dog——."

"It just seemed to float along."

"Th-that's just what it did do, Bill. J-just float along. And——what's that?"

Above the quietness came a thud-thud of footsteps across the short grass of the home meadow. Was there yet another ghostly apparition haunting the marshes? Bill and Andy rose slowly, prepared for anything to happen, and Andy's heart was thumping painfully when a running figure lunged out of the darkness.

"Bill—Andy——."

"Nancy," said the two boys, both together. "What did you see, Nancy," asked Andy eagerly.

"Th-the Dog. You know, the—the——."

Nancy couldn't speak for a moment or two. The two boys didn't guess what an effort it had been for her to run across that dark and silent meadow, after seeing the frightening apparition of the ghostly hound.

"D-did you see it?" demanded Nancy then. "You told me that if you saw or heard anything you'd come to tell me and——."

"I reckon we're only just getting over the shock of it. Nancy, you've got some—some pluck," Bill said admiringly. "That is, if you saw the—the Thing. And coming

across from Kiney Cottage alone after seeing that——."

"I ran, and I was scared all right, and—oh, I'm here now, aren't I?" Nancy squatted down on the grass, and tumbled her red hair above her vivid little face. "Do you know what I think? Do you know what I'm sure of now," she said vehemently.

"We haven't had time even to think yet."

"I said that I should have been here to look after you both," Nancy said scornfully.

"I know what I *know*," Bill said soberly. "Wh-what-ever that thing was, it—it wasn't a ghostly dog. There aren't such things. Any more than there are ghostly carriages that move along without horses."

"But, Bill——."

"I know. We just saw that dog without a head. And you and Nancy saw the carriage without a horse. But there's some other explanation, I'm just sure of that. There aren't such things as ghosts or apparitions."

Bill's quiet words did a lot to still Andy's fear. Andy had plenty of courage, perhaps too much for a boy of thirteen, but the unexplained and the ghostly had the power to frighten him. His cousin's sober conviction made Andy lift his head sharply.

"S-some sort of mechanical dog, do you think?" he suggested. "Yes, that'd be it, Bill," he went on, more eagerly. "It didn't bark or make a sound, did it? P-perhaps it was a mechanical animal, like a—a hare on a greyhound track, or——."

"How could that be worked across the marshes, fathead," Nancy said witheringly.

"Well, it's something of the sort, anyway. Bill seems to think so. And——."

"You haven't listened to my idea yet. You remember Blakelock coming past the camp fire last night, don't you?

Well, I wouldn't mind betting that he sent this—this Headless Dog to try and frighten us away."

"Are you sure he didn't try to train the thing to bite us, without a head?"

"You can laugh, Bill. Andy knows I'm right, don't you, Andy?"

Andy nodded his head in the darkness.

"I wouldn't put anything past that Blakelock man. And—I'm pretty sure that the Horseless Carriage and this ghostly dog and—and Limpey's Hall as well, are all something to do with Larry. But how, or why——?"

"We ought to *do* something."

"All right, just tell me what we can do, Nancy Bates?" Bill asked.

Nancy shuffled her feet. An ember from the raked-out fire spluttered sparks.

"Well, there's Mr. Gage, and——."

"And that's all," said Bill, as Nancy trailed off vaguely. "We haven't really anything against Mr. Gage, except suspicions. I'm just as jolly keen as you two to get to the bottom of it all, especially because of Larry, but what good could we do just watching Mr. Gage? In any case, he's asked us to Limpey's Hall whenever we like to go."

Nancy sniffed. She looked uncertainly across the dark marsh. The excitement which had made her forget her fear was gone now.

"Like us to come back with you, Nancy?"

"W-well, if—if you like, Andy. I—I could do with some more of that soup now, couldn't you?"

"That would just put the tin hat on things!"

They went back with Nancy across the marsh to Kiney Cottage. The girl looked along the dim marsh road, hesitated for a moment or two, looked as if she meant to

say something, and then went in. Andy and Bill looked at each other.

"Nancy looked as if she wanted to tell us something, Bill."

"She has some little game on, I can tell that. Sh-shall we go back and sleep in the tent, Andy?"

"We-el——."

"Mother would want to know all about it if she found us asleep in our rooms tomorrow, and then she wouldn't ever let us camp out again."

Andy braced his shoulders.

"I—I don't suppose whatever it was will come back again, do you?"

"We'll be asleep, anyway. And it can't bite, without a head."

Andy grinned weakly. That was the sort of joke he might appreciate, by the light of day, but not so soon after seeing a ghostly, headless dog that loped silently about the quiet marshes.

They went back to the tent. It needed a lot of courage, but they crept inside, and huddled between the blankets again. Andy drew his right hand over his head and before he knew it, he was asleep.

He woke, to find his Aunt Julia shaking the tent pole, and nudging both him and Bill with her foot.

"Wake up. Bill—Andy. I thought you'd like your breakfast out here."

The boys stirred themselves, as Mrs. Goodey spread warmed-up pasties and a can of tea outside the tent, with cups and plates and cutlery.

"You didn't sleep very well, you two boys, I can tell that by the blankets," Aunt Julia said sharply. "They look as if you were in and out of bed all night."

"We were all right, Mums."

"Did you hear the cows making that hullabaloo? I couldn't sleep, and I heard them and——."

Andy and Bill looked uneasily at each other, as Mrs. Goodey's voice trailed off. They knew why she couldn't sleep. They could tell, even now, that she was bearing herself up well under the strain of worrying over Larry, and that she tried not to show it. Every now and again her grey eyes strayed along the chase towards Kiney Cottage. The postman was due about now. Perhaps there would be a letter from Larry?

Mrs. Goodey went flying across the field, as the postman cycled up the chase.

The two boys forgot their breakfast. They saw Bill's mother almost snatch at the letters, and walk back to the farmhouse. They saw her shoulders droop, as she pushed the letters into her apron pocket, and Bill heaved a deep sigh.

"And that's that," he mumbled. "There's nothing from Larry, I can tell."

"I don't think there will be," Andy said quietly.

"Andy——."

"We haven't even started to find out the mystery of the marshes yet. We don't know why the ghostly carriage and the Headless Dog should suddenly start to appear here. We don't know why Mr. Gage should pretend he doesn't want anyone to know, and then tell everyone, to scare 'em, and——."

"Is someone talking about me?"

Andy flushed red. Mr. Gage, stepping silently on the soft grass, had come from the back of the tent, a net bag full of mushrooms in one yellow hand. He was smiling, however, and Andy hoped that he hadn't heard what had been said.

"Andy here was saying that he thought you'd be

interested to know that we saw the Headless Dog last night," Bill said, coming to his cousin's rescue.

"Headless Dog—no!" Mr. Gage seemed excited.

"It was the Dog all right. He came loping across towards us, all white and ghostly and without a head and——."

"You didn't dream all this?"

"We certainly did not. Nancy saw it as well. Didn't you, Nancy?" Andy said, as the red-haired girl came up to the little camp.

"Uh-huh. And—and it was horrible."

"Well." Mr. Gage sank down on the grass, and almost upset the can of tea. "And there was I, waiting up, hoping to see either the Horseless Carriage or—I say, you children. It isn't safe for you to camp out here, with that—that thing about."

"We'll be all right, Mr. Gage."

"But you must let me be the judge of that. I—I would never forgive myself, if anything happened to you which I could prevent. Bill, does your father know about this? Or your mother?"

"N-no."

"Mr. Gage, if you tell Aunt Julia or Uncle Daniel——."

"You must let me make up my own mind, Andy. I'm worried—terribly worried."

In fact, so worried was Mr. Evelyn Gage that he forgot all about the mushrooms which he had gathered, and walked across to the farm. Nancy made an expressive face at his departing figure.

"You know jolly well what he's going to do," she said disgustedly. "He'll tell your parents, Bill, and bang goes the camp."

"I expect so. But I—I suppose they ought to know."

"Let's have some breakfast, anyway. Have you had yours, Nancy?"

"Of course not. That's what I came over for. I've brought a tin of sardines this time. We've only got to warm them over the fire, and——."

"We'll eat our pasties," said both boys together, and Nancy just glared, and went methodically on with starting up the fire, for her sardines on toast.

Her mother came over, before they had finished breakfast.

"I came over to tell you that I should have to be away most of the day, Nancy," she said. "There's a meeting over at Malton, and then I've to go to a Rally. I'm wondering about your meals."

"Nancy is good at making soup from cans, Mrs. Bates," Bill grinned. "And she'd have plenty, 'cos nobody else could eat it."

"Pig," hissed the girl.

"Nancy——?"

"Well, he is. And I—I've just had a wonderful breakfast I cooked myself. I know I dropped one of the sardines in the fire, and it was a bit gritty but it was jolly good and——."

"You make me feel as if I should take up cookery classes again," her mother smiled. "But still, so long as you'll be all right. I should be home in the early evening."

She kissed Nancy goodbye, much to that girl's secret disgust, in front of Bill and Andy, but the children hadn't finished with visitors yet. Mrs. Goodey came across from the farmhouse, her apron flapping in the light breeze, her thin face rather grim.

"Why didn't you tell me about that—that dog you were supposed to have seen last night, Bill?" she asked sharply.

"W-we didn't want to bother you, Mums. And——."

"We were afraid you wouldn't let us camp out any more, Aunt Julia," Andy said, with a little grin.

"And that I won't—I wouldn't have had you out here on the marsh alone last night for anything, had I known. And you don't sleep here tonight, my lads. You can keep the tent up, if you like——."

"I suppose Mr. Gage told you, Mrs. Goodey?" Nancy said hotly.

"And rightly he should, too. I'm very glad he did. Headless Dogs, indeed! And Horseless Carriages. And——"

She broke off, and her thin neck tightened, as she swung round and went back to the farmhouse. Nancy broke the little silence with an explosive snort of anger.

"There you are—that's your Mr. Smarmy Gage for you. His man sent the dog to try and frighten you away, and, 'cos that didn't work, Mr. Gage persuades your people that it isn't safe for you. And why? 'Cos he's up to some dirty work of his own, that's why. Something that he doesn't want anyone to see or know about."

And Andy, as he loosened the tent ropes, was quite sure that Nancy was right.

There was all of the day ahead, however, and the children enjoyed it.

On Bill's suggestion, they rambled across the marshes to the sea-wall. Sometimes a covey of partridges would scurry ahead of them. The plovers would wheel around, and sometimes they would hop along, just in front, dragging their wings as if they were injured.

"That's an old game with the plovers, Andy," Bill explained. "They pretend they're hurt, just to entice you away from their nests. There'd be eggs in them, or young ones—they're cunning, those lapwings."

There was a lot more for the country-loving Bill to show

his town cousin. Under a bridge along the wide marsh ditch he showed Andy the eels, coiled below in the shadow. He found the forme of a hare, too, in the middle of the marsh, and the cunning little nest of a reed warbler, laced among the swaying rushes.

They reached the high, earthen sea-wall, climbed it, and walked along the salterns towards Folywell Point. Here the broad Crouch tumbled into the grey North Sea. The salterns were split by winding, muddy little rills, most of them with green, slime-covered posts sticking from the middle.

For Andy it was wild, exciting, and mysterious. He could imagine just anything happening along this lonely stretch of the coast. All that could be seen were a few russet-sailed barges, beating down towards the London River.

Then he gave an exclamation, and pointed over the salterns.

"Look, there's a boat. Stuck in that little rill—see! Bags we go and look at it."

Nancy frowned a little.

"I've never seen a boat there before, have you, Bill? It—it's hidden, almost. We'll go look, anyway. Andy—Andy, you ass, you'll want your slippers off—it's thick oozy mud out there."

They sat on the sloping sea-wall, took off their slippers, and then padded cautiously down the rough sea lavender of the salterns. In patches the mud oozed half-way up Andy's legs. He clambered down one muddy rill—the tide was running out—following in the track of Bill and Nancy, and then he opened his eyes wide.

It was a powerful looking motor launch. Tucked away in the bend of that deep, narrow rill, its deck almost covered by the trailing sea lavender, it would never be

seen from the sea. The rough sedge arched over the bows, so that it was difficult to see it even from the sea-wall. The launch was secured from the rising tides by a stout rope to a post stuck in the mud, and a narrow plank led down to the well deck aft.

"Th-there doesn't seem to be anyone aboard," Nancy said, her eyes shining. "I vote we look over it."

"I'm with you, Ginger," said Andy, forgetful, and then he was pushed over on to the muddy salterns by a wrathful red head.

"You've been pretty good, Andy Watts, but if I hear you say that again——."

"Peace, children." That was Bill, still looking thoughtfully at the launch. "It—it's a beauty, isn't it?"

"Powerful, too." Andy stroked his chin. "I shouldn't be surprised if you could cruise over to France with that," he added.

"And get away from anyone who was after you," added Nancy eagerly.

"You'd make a mystery out of just nothing at all, you two," Bill put in stolidly. "Maybe the engine went phut, and whoever it belongs to ran her into this rill."

"Well, I bags we look over it, and then we shall know," Nancy said, in her forthright way. "I'm going, anyway."

She ran down the muddy gangplank, and jumped to the well deck. Bill looked at Andy, shrugged his shoulders, and followed. When they were all down there, Andy poked around, his eyes shining.

"A nice job. Diesel powered, a covered wheelhouse—good losh alive, Nancy, look at all that brass, inside the wheel-house. How'd you like to polish all that?"

Nancy sniffed. "Mother has got a good collection of brass at home, and sometimes I have to shine that up. Sometimes. When it's raining, and I can't go out."

She peered through the window of the wheelhouse. "There hasn't been much elbow grease on that brass, lately."

"The sea air tarnishes it. Come on, I think we ought to get off."

Nancy folded her arms indignantly. "Bill Goodey, you are an old fuss-pot. We haven't seen anything yet. Shouldn't there be a—a log or something, to tell us who the boat belongs to?"

"It'd be in the cabin if so, and that'd be locked," Andy volunteered. Nancy put her shoulder carelessly against the cabin door, and then looked round, startled.

"It—it isn't locked. See——."

"Then that means that the owner is somewhere close," Bill said quickly. "Perhaps he's gone across to one of the cottages for a bucket of drinking water." He edged towards the plank. "I don't like to be caught snooping round other people's property like this."

"Oh, I'm in the cabin now," called out Nancy. "Come in, both of you, unless you're scared."

There was only one answer to that. Both the boys crowded into the commodious little cabin. The panelled walls gleamed with varnish. For'ard were two bunks, one above the other, and a swinging lamp swung gently from the ceiling.

"It's quite a job," said Andy again.

"Yes, but it doesn't tell us much, or—Bill, Andy. Look."

Nancy flung out her hand, and pointed to what looked like a scrap of cloth, under the bottom bunk. Then she stooped eagerly, picked it up, and thrust it under Bill's nose.

"Paint, Bill Goodey. Yellow paint, on a bit of canvas, and——."

"You don't have to shout at me, Nancy."

He took the scrap of paint daubed canvas from her, and Andy peered over his shoulder to look. It was only a scrap of material, but the yellow paint looked fresh.

"Mr. Smarmy Evelyn Gage," Nancy said promptly.

Bill groaned. "Now we're going to have it all again. You've got the Gage bee in your bonnet, Nancy. We haven't a scrap of proof that Mr. Gage isn't what he pretends to be."

"You said pretends to be, and that's right. Yellow paint on his sleeve. Yellow paint on Larry's trousers leg—you told me that. And now yellow paint on a bit of canvas, in this motor launch that's hidden away, out of sight. Answer me all those conundrums, Bill Goodey?"

Bill passed the scrap of canvas over to Andy, and then tugged at his hair.

"I can't," he confessed.

"This boat," Nancy went on firmly, "belongs to Mr. Gage, and he uses it for his ne-nefarious work."

"Nefarious work—that's a good one!"

"And don't you laugh at me, Andy Watts. I can use big words if I like." She suddenly grinned. "I don't know many, anyway. I'm going to look round."

There was no stopping the red-head. She tip-toed up to the shelf of books, at the side of the bunks. She wrinkled her nose over a sheaf of charts, and then put them all back again.

"No name on the fly leaf of any of those books. Where would they keep the log? Or—or the ship's papers? Ships have to have papers, don't they, Andy?"

"I—I don't know if a motor launch would have to. I—good losh, there's someone coming."

The children instinctively bunched themselves together, as they heard footsteps down the gang-plank. The next minute the villainous-looking Blakelock, rubbing his hands on a piece of oily waste, came through the cabin door. His mouth gaped open when he saw them, and his cavernous eyes blazed.

"Snoopin' around agin, are you. Clear orf," he growled, and Nancy giggled.

"I knew you'd say 'clear orf,'" she said calmly.

"Don't you know any other words, Mr. Blakelock?"

"I said clear orf." His hand strayed to his hip pocket, and Andy's heart gave a jump.

"It's a nice boat you have here, Mr. Blakelock," Nancy went on. "Why do you keep it hidden away?"

"Clear orf!" The man didn't seem able to find any new words.

"We're not doing any harm," Bill put in. "We didn't know who the boat belonged to, did we? What are you getting in a temper about, Mr. Blakelock?"

The thin lips of the man twisted into a vicious line. He looked for a moment as if he would throw himself upon the three of them, but then he braced his shoulders, and even managed a little smile.

"Mebbe Mr. Gage wouldn't like it if I pushed you in the 'drink,'" he said, with heavy playfulness. "I could do, you know. All three of you."

The fingers on his low, hanging arms were twitching. Evil peeped from his deep set eyes. Andy had the chilling thought that this man would be quite capable of such a thing, and would find pleasure in doing it.

"We—we're going now, anyway." Bill edged Andy and Nancy past the glowering man, through the door, and then followed himself.

"Now lookee here, youngsters." There was a whine in

Blakelock's voice now. "I didn't mean to scare ye. Me—I wouldn't hurt a fly."

Nancy sniffed. She felt more defiant, now that she was outside the little cabin.

"And listen, youngsters. Don't ye talk to anyone about this boat, will ye? Not even to Mr. Gage." He put a finger to his nose, in a sly gesture. "He don't know about this boat, see? It's a bit o' something on the side for me, see?"

"Do you mean that you own this boat?"

The man Blakelock squinted slyly at Andy.

"Bought her an' painted her up meself. Mr. Gage shouldn't grumble, but he would, although I did her up in me spare time. Fit for a king now, ain't she?"

"Is she fast?" Nancy called through the doorway.

The man's deep set eyes suddenly glowed. "Fast? Fast? There ain't a launch around the coast that'd——." He broke off, and gave what passed for a grating laugh. "I always pretend that," he mumbled then. "Pretend it to meself, I mean." He squinted at them. "She wouldn't pass an old barge, agin wind, that she wouldn't."

"She looks——."

"I'm tellin' ye, ain't I?" growled Blakelock to Bill. "I should know—she's mine, ain't she? And now I want you orf."

"He means clear orf!"

He scowled malevolently at Nancy, who led the way up the muddy gangplank. The children walked back across the salterns to the sea-wall, where they had left their slippers. Nancy scooped the black mud from her feet with handfuls of grass.

"Do you believe what old Cheery Face said?" she demanded.

"It isn't his boat—I'm sure enough of that."

"He's been told to say that, Andy, if anyone should see it. That's why he tried to be friendly—well, as friendly as he could be, with his face. And I'll bet there's some speed in that boat, too."

"You're always betting, Nancy," grinned Bill, as he tied the laces of his slippers.

"Well——!"

"We do know," went on Bill, "that there's a boat, and that it's fast, and that it might belong to Mr. Gage—."

"And that he uses it for smuggling," ended Andy, his eyes sparkling. "And perhaps Larry got to hear of it."

Bill's eyes clouded. He hadn't such a vivid imagination as the other two, but he could, perhaps, see clearer.

"I—I can't help thinking that if there is any fishy business, th-that Larry is mixed up in it," he muttered, and Andy and Nancy knew what an effort it was for him to say that. "I mean, he had the chance to tell us all, but instead he—he went off again, without a word."

"Larry wouldn't do anything wrong," Nancy protested stoutly.

Bill didn't answer. He climbed up the side of the seawall, and the other two followed. The mystery of Larry was hanging like a little cloud over them once more.

Dinner at camp dispersed it, however.

Nancy rummaged in the pantry at home, and produced a tin of stew, and a tinned pudding. She politely but firmly refused the meal which Mrs. Goodey included for her with Bill's and Andy's. A camp wasn't a camp, said Nancy, unless you prepared your own meals. She burned her fingers and her vivid little face went the colour of a beetroot as she warmed her canned meal over the fire she made.

"I think we should call her Tin-Can Nancy," Andy grinned.

"If you think that I can't really cook—with flour, I mean, and a stove, and——."

"That sounds like a good mixture. Mix the stove well into the pastry——."

"Ass." Nancy threw the empty tin at Bill. "What do we do this afternoon?"

Bill thought it would be a good idea to cycle into Bardwell. Andy could let down the saddle of his Aunt Julia's cycle. Just because she hadn't thought of it, Nancy didn't think much of the idea, but she soon altered her tune when Bill said that he and Andy would go on their own.

Andy liked his first real glimpse of Bardwell.

The little village lay beyond the railway station. There was a small, old-fashioned quay, fronting the wide river, with small shipyards and sail-makers lofts along the waterfront. They had some ices, and then Nancy remembered a birthday card she wanted for a school chum, and they went along to a little art and fancy goods shop, down a narrow road from the quay.

Nancy nudged Bill and Andy, as they went into the shop. Mr. Gage was at the counter, his back to them.

"Oil paints, sir—no, we're right out of them," the bent, elderly owner of the shop was saying. "Now, water colours—we've plenty of them. We sell quite a lot, to the visitors, and——."

"But I want oil paints." Mr. Gage's usually affable voice was edged with impatience.

"I'm sorry, sir. But if it was just a river scene you wanted to do, or a picture of the old quay—that's a rare popular view, that it is—you'd find that water colours——."

"Rubbish," snapped Mr. Gage, and he stalked from the shop, giving the three children a vague sort of nod as he went.

"I wonder why Mr. Gage should want oil paints," Andy said, wrinkling his nose thoughtfully when they were cycling home to Colward Farm.

"That's just what I thought," Nancy said excitedly, steering her machine between Bill's and Andy's. "Perhaps it was yellow oil paint on his sleeve that day we went to Limpey's Hall."

"That wouldn't make him a crook or a smuggler or whatever it is you're thinking he is."

"N-no, but Bill—Mr. Gage seemed alarmed when Andy mentioned about the paint on his sleeve. Remember? And—Larry paints as well, doesn't he? He——."

Her voice trailed off. She could have cut her tongue out, the next moment, for Bill's stolid face went gloomier still. Andy was still wrinkling his nose in thought. He was quite convinced now, that somehow or other, Larry was connected with Mr. Gage, and those ghostly manifestations which roamed about the marshes.

The children were in no mood to do anything that evening.

They hung around the farm, and then Nancy went home, saying importantly that she would get a meal ready for her mother, and Bill and Andy helped round up the chickens and ducks. The strain was showing in Mrs. Goodey's eyes now. She hardly spoke. The worry of Larry was pressing on top of her.

Andy was soon off to sleep that night.

So much had happened, since he first got off the train at Bardwell, and mystery had piled upon mystery, but he could see no way to explain it. He was dreaming of the villainous-looking Blakelock who, for some reason or other became suddenly luminous, so that all his bones showed, when he woke with a start.

He peered from under the clothes.

There—that was the sound again. On his window. Like small gravel being thrown up to it. He lay there, waiting for it to come again, and it did, and then he scrambled out of bed, to peer down from the window to see Nancy in the yard below.

She put her finger to her lips, and beckoned him to come down. Andy went for Bill first. Bill had been wakened by gravel on his window, too, and in silence they dressed, and climbed down.

Nancy was almost hopping on one leg with excitement. She dragged them away from the house and up the chase, before she spoke.

“It came again,” she hissed then, and paused for effect.

“What came?” mumbled Bill. He was still drowsy, and was rubbing his eyes.

“The Horseless Carriage. I was waiting by the window. And Bill—Andy—it isn’t anything su-super—you know, supernatural,” Nancy floundered in her excitement. “It doesn’t float along and—oh, I’ve been waiting for this. It was my secret. And when——.”

“What on earth are you trying to tell us?” demanded Andy.

Nancy drew a deep breath.

“Whatever it might look like, that Horseless Carriage has got pneumatic tyres. I know, see. I’ve been putting broken bottles on the marsh road, every night—and sweeping them up again in the morning. And to-night, while I was watching that Horseless Carriage, I heard a tyre blow out. Now what do you say about that?”



CHAPTER VI

CAPTURED

“GOOD losh alive—a ghost carriage has a puncture!” Andy whispered the words in astonishment, and then he laughed. He just had to. It was such an anti-climax.

“That was a jolly good idea of yours, Nancy,” Bill said admiringly. “We wondered what you were up to——.”

“You’d have laughed, if I’d told you about the broken bottles. And after you saying that there couldn’t be such a thing as a ghost carriage——.”

“But that still doesn’t explain it.”

“But don’t you see, Bill? If it has pneumatic tyres it—oh, I suggest we go down the marsh road and look. Have you got your torch, Bill?”

“When you dragged us up here as soon as we climbed down from my room—how could I? I’ll run back for it. You two wait here.”

Bill ran back silently along the edge of the chase. Nancy could hardly keep still for excitement.

"He is an old sobersides, isn't he?" she said explosively to Andy. "Sometimes I could just scream——."

"He's a jolly good pal to have."

"As if I don't know that, Andy Watts," sniffed the girl. "But he's so cautious. And he looks all round a thing and then through it and—huh, I'd have gone to the police before now about Mr. Gage if I'd had my way."

"And they'd have thought you just a silly little girl."

"Little girl. Silly little——Andy Watts, you might come from London, but if——."

"Here comes Bill. And be quiet, Ginger. You'll wake your mother."

Only the thought of making a noise and waking her mother kept Nancy from setting on Andy for using that hated nickname, and then the three of them silently passed Kiney Cottage, and out along the marsh road. It wasn't long before they reached the jagged pieces of broken glass.

"And that's where the tyre blew out—see." As Bill shone the torch, Andy pointed to where the tracks of some vehicle were suddenly wide and slurred in the dust of the marsh road.

"What do we do now?"

"Follow the tracks, of course, and that shouldn't be difficult."

"We ought to clear this broken glass out of the way first," said Bill, and the others helped him to push the jagged fragments to the grass verge. Andy's eyes were glowing now.

"I believe we're going to find out something tonight," he observed.

"And I started it, didn't I? If I hadn't thought of the glass——."

"Gosh, isn't that just like a girl! They expect to keep being praised up. Remind me to tell you how clever you are, every ten minutes, and——."

"Bill Goodey——."

"Oh, come on."

Nancy bottled her fiery temper, which was soon gone, anyway. Bill shielded the torch as he shone it on the dusty road.

"It must lead to Limpey's Hall," Andy mumbled.

"It needn't. It can go right on to Northminster marshes, or any of the farms beyond Limpey's. I don't believe in jumping to conclusions, Andy."

"He's got a tortoise mind, Andy."

"That's better than—oh, gosh!"

Bill had stopped short. His eyes were raised over the marshes, and then the caterpillars with icy feet crawled up Andy's spine again. Nancy edged close to both of them.

It was the Headless Dog once more, bounding across the marshes, its neck, cut off short, lunged forward.

"It—it's worse than the ghost c-carriage," chattered Nancy. "B-Bill——."

Her voice trailed off. Neither Andy nor Bill could speak. The great, luminous body loped nearer and nearer, even more ghostly, it's gaunt ribs plainly showing. Nearer, nearer, with the three children crouched together, breathless, frightened——.

Then again the Headless Dog swung away, loping over the side ditch with one bound. A moment later the unearthly silence was split by a wild yelp of pain, almost as terrifying, and Nancy crouched closer to Bill and Andy.

"B-Bill——."

"It—it's stopped."

"And a—a ghost dog wouldn't yelp l-like that," muttered Andy. "At least——."

"Bill, you're not going near it. Y-you're not going near it," shouted Nancy in alarm. "It—it might hurt you or—Bill, it isn't safe, or——."

"I reckon it's our chance to find out what it is," Bill said stolidly. "Are you coming, Andy?"

"Y-yes. If—if you are. We'll all go."

"Of course we'll all go," Nancy said, fighting down her own fear, as the other two were doing.

They found the gate which led into the marsh. There was no difficulty in finding the dog, for it was still yelping in pain, and its gaunt, luminous body was arching this way and that.

The three children with bated breath moved slowly over the marsh. Bill and Andy were in front. Their knees felt like water, but they forced themselves nearer and nearer to the luminous thing, and then Bill, shining his torch, gave a little, broken laugh of sheer relief.

"It's got a head—Andy, Nancy, look." He held the torch steady, and they saw the powerful head of a huge hound, with rolling eyes and white, snapping teeth. "It's an ordinary dog and it's caught in a poacher's trap."

"B-but——."

"It's just an ordinary dog and the body and legs and part of the neck are daubed with luminous paint." Andy said excitedly. "That's your Headless Dog for you. That——."

"The—the poor thing," Nancy said at once. "Can you get it out of the trap, Bill?"

Bill spoke softly to the yelping dog. At first it took no notice, but then it quietened down a little, as Bill ventured forward, and stroked the dark head.

"I—I wouldn't do that for——."

"He's used to dogs, Andy. And if Bill can't—ah!"

Nancy gasped, as Bill put his heel on the trap to release the front paw of the eerie looking, luminous dog. The next moment it loped away, lame, before Bill could hold it, and disappeared across the marshes.

"If—if we could have followed that home——."

"You'd need wings to do that. Anyway, we know what it is now." Bill rubbed at his heel, where the cruel jaws of the trap had caught. "Just a hound with luminous paint——."

"And I'll bet Mr. Gage trained it to roam the marshes, just to scare folks away from Limpey's Hall."

"She's betting again, Andy!"

"Mr. Gage had some paint on his sleeve," Andy said, wrinkling his nose thoughtfully.

"But that was yellow paint. And thick yellow paint at that."

"Perhaps l-luminous paint is yellow," Nancy put in eagerly. "Did you notice if it shone, Andy?"

"I—I wouldn't notice in the light, would I? At least—oh, good losh alive, we're forgetting that ghost carriage. We're supposed to be following the tracks of that, aren't we?"

They went back across the marsh to the road again. The moon was just beginning to rise now, and there was a faint summer night mist over the marshes. There was a brooding silence which chilled the three adventurers, too, after the reaction of the Headless Dog.

"If—if we went back for the police, Bill——."

"Police?" Andy said scornfully. "We—we're going to find this out on our own, aren't we, Bill?"

"We're going to try."

Bill's voice was quiet. Andy knew that he was worried, and fearful of what he might find out about Larry. In

silence they walked down the marsh road, Bill's torch showing them, at times, the broad slurred track of the vehicle, which told them that it hadn't left the road.

They reached the narrower road leading to Limpey's Hall. Andy felt keyed up, as Bill shone his torch down.

"I knew it," he said softly. "The tracks lead down to Limpey's Hall——."

"I've said all along it was Mr. Gage."

"And if you jolly well shout like that, Nancy, you'll be telling him as well."

"I wouldn't care. Are—are we going back for the police now? I—I think——."

"Nancy, you're not scared!"

"Of—of course I'm not. But I do think it's a job now for grown-ups and the police. We've found out everything, and——."

"We haven't found out much at all. Come on."

They climbed over the new white gate. Bill was more than ever cautious now of screening the torch, but there was not much need to shine it, for the narrow road led only to Limpey's Hall. He ventured a quick beam of light near the gate to the grounds of the house.

"It went right through," he muttered.

"And we're going to find out where it is and what it is," Andy said promptly, his eyes sparkling now with the sheer thrill of it.

Nancy said nothing at all. She had always prided herself on being just as adventurous as any boy, but just now she was feeling more than a bit queasy inside. Perhaps it was seeing that Headless Dog? Perhaps she realised that they were, after all, only three growing up children, however plucky they might be, and that in that silent house were at least two desperate men, if their suspicions were correct.

However if Bill and Andy were going on she was not going to be left behind. Having made up their minds to make further investigations, the three of them climbed the gate and dropped softly to the gravelled drive on the other side.

As if by one accord, now, they kept close together.

They waited for a moment, listening for any sounds that might come from the house or the grounds. Everything seemed quiet however and the house was apparently in complete darkness.

Stealthily they made their way along the drive which curved round the house. Once they stopped, thinking that they had heard sounds of movement in the shrubs but to their relief they found that it was only the night breeze, rustling the leaves. From the marshes beyond came the melancholy cry of the plovers, which heightened the tension which was gripping the three.

"If—if we're going to follow those tracks——."

"Shush!"

A door slammed in the dark house. A light sprang up, to reveal the drooping figure of Blakelock. Bill drew Andy and Nancy back into the wet leaves of an evergreen, as they heard the crunch of the man's heavy footsteps.

Andy passed his tongue round his dry lips. A spider's web, wet with the mist, trailed across his nose, and he wanted to sneeze, but somehow he kept it in. The heavy footsteps of Blakelock came nearer and nearer. The beam from a powerful torch was being darted here and there. Nancy's elbow was dug hard into Andy's side, but he dare not move.

The beam of the torch reached the huge shrub in which they were hidden.

It played over the leaves, stopped, and then went on.

Andy pressed his eyes tightly in sheer relief, as the crunching footsteps went on.

"Blakelock."

The man growled something.

"Blakelock. Where are you?—Blakelock."

Blakelock just grunted again. Even with Mr. Gage, he seemed to dole out his words sparingly. The three heard the crunch of Mr. Gage's feet along the drive.

"Anyone there?" His voice was sharp, anxious.

"No one."

"Are you sure? There was the glow of a light along the marsh road—I saw it from the top window. And Gleason said——."

"There ain't hair nor hide of anyone," growled Blakelock.

The children didn't move, however. Mr. Gage had taken the torch from his man, and plunged among the shrubs. As he brushed past the evergreen where they were hidden, the wet spider's web trailed over Andy's face. He bit back the startled cry, and Mr. Gage went back to Blakelock.

"Maybe there isn't anyone," he muttered.

"There ain't."

They went on, up the drive again. A door opened, closed. Not until then dared the three move, and then they came out, cautiously.

"I—I thought he'd found us that time," whispered Nancy, shivering a little.

"He sounded scared himself. And Bill, did you notice? He said something about a man named Gleason. At least——."

"That means there's three of them in the house. Bill—Andy——."

"We're going to find out what there is here, before we

go to the police," Bill said stolidly. "And for goodness sake don't make a noise. They might be watching from the dark windows."

They moved silently between the bushes, keeping close to the drive. Bill dared not use his torch now. A branch swung back as he passed, and hit Andy in the face, and he gasped, and then felt Nancy's elbow dig into his back.

They reached the end of the dark house. The drive stopped in front of some low outhouses. Bill put his lips close to Andy's ear.

"The tracks must have come right along the drive," he whispered. "And so they'd end there——."

"What is it—a shed?"

"Mr. Gage uses it as a garage. It used to be the old brewhouse, when Limpey's Hall was a farm. There's room for two cars at least, and——."

"What are you two mumbling about?" hissed Nancy.

Bill didn't answer. He didn't know whether to go on, or escape from the grounds of Limpeys and hurry for the police. At last he motioned them to follow, however, and, on tip-toe, they crept across the gravel to the low outhouse. Big, solid, double doors fronted the garage, and Andy felt along until his fingers clutched round a padlock.

"It's locked."

"Doesn't that just show you," hissed Nancy. "Stuck right out here on the marshes—why, we never lock up, at home."

"Don't make a noise like a soda siphon. You'll have us caught, and——."

A door slammed, somewhere or other. Bill dragged Nancy round the side of the garage. Andy followed, and then they waited, their hearts beating madly.

"Is—is anyone coming?"

"No. At least—good losh alive, they're still searching. Shush—don't even breathe."

For long, agonising minutes, the three children crouched against the side wall of the garage. They could hear Blakelock muttering, as he searched the bushes in the garden. Once he lurched past the front of the garage. They heard him try the door, and then his slurring footsteps died away.

"Th—that was a n-narrow squeak, Bill."

"They're worried, aren't they? Worried and scared. If—now what's wrong, Nancy?"

Nancy was clutching eagerly at Bill, and pointing in to the darkness, which didn't tell Bill much at all. He felt the red head's lips against his ear.

"This side door, Bill. It's open. Huh, trust a girl to find out things. You'd have——."

"Don't shout."

"Who's shouting? Bill Goodey——."

She broke off with a gasp, because Bill in exasperation dug his elbow into her ribs.

"You just wait until we're out of this, Bill Goodey," she muttered. "Andy, come along here," she whispered then. "We can get in."

Andy edged and felt his way along to the small open side door. A quick flash from Bill's torch revealed the polished bonnet of Mr. Gage's car.

"We daren't use the torch too much," whispered Bill. "It wasn't this car that made the tracks, was it, Andy?"

"The garage is big enough to hold two or three cars, I expect."

The inky darkness of the garage was overwhelming. It seemed to hit them in the face, like a cold, solid wall, and it needed all of Andy's courage, to feel his way past

the buffers of Mr. Gage's car, until he touched the bonnet of another car.

"Nancy—Bill. Come on. And—good losh alive, this is the car—it's got a flat tyre."

The other two crowded along now, and Bill risked a flash of his torch, to reveal the front tyre, pancaked against the garage floor.

"That's my doing," Nancy said proudly. "If I hadn't thought——."

"She'll crow about this for weeks, Andy," groaned Bill. "What sort of a car is it?"

"Can't tell." Andy was feeling along the bonnet, and up the windscreen. "It seems like a van of some sort. If you—ah!"

He gave a gasp as Bill risked another flash of his torch. The light revealed a dark blue vehicle of the trade van type, and the three of them stared blankly at it, until Bill snicked off the light again.

Andy gave a little laugh.

"Now what's Nancy got to say? One Horseless Carriage and it's a milk or a fish van, and——."

"It's the car I punctured with the broken glass," snapped Nancy.

"It could have been punctured earlier."

The red haired girl sniffed. "You would think of that, Sobersides. How many cars come down the Marsh Road, apart from Mr. Gage's? And—and why should a trade van be locked away in here?"

"Perhaps this man Gleason is a friend of Mr. Gage's or—or Blakelock's."

"As if Blakelock could ever have a friend," Nancy said loftily. "We followed the tracks down here, and—well, it just jolly well has to be the Horseless Carriage."

Nancy was edging between the two cars now. She

reached the back doors of the van, and the two boys gathered round her, as she tried the spring latch. It gave to her touch, and she swung the doors wide.

Bill shone his torch inside, and Andy gave a deep sigh of disappointment. He hadn't quite known what to expect, but certainly not the almost complete emptiness of the van.

"Just a blanket or two," he mumbled.

"And a bit of rolled up canvas," said Nancy excitedly.

"Canvas? And those two bits of canvas we found along the marsh road——."

"Bill Goodey, you said they didn't mean anything at all. You said, didn't he, Andy, that——."

Nancy broke off with a gasp then, for Andy had snatched at the roll of canvas. By accident, Bill snicked off the light, and then they all took a quick, indrawn breath. As the canvas unrolled down the back of the van, a series of broad, luminous stripes were revealed.

"Good losh alive."

Andy dropped the canvas, as if he had been stung.

"Open it out, Andy—open it right out." Even the stolid and cautious Bill was excited now. "Gosh, can't you see?"

"It—it's luminous paint," Nancy mumbled.

"Luminous paint on canvas, to make it look like an old fashioned carriage from a distance. Nancy, you were right, you were right. Look, this long daub of paint, it's meant to look like the shafts of the carriage, stretched out ahead, and empty——."

"And the canvas cloth is placed over this van," broke in Andy, awed by their discovery.

Nancy wasn't awed at all. "And when the cloth is whisked off, way down the marsh road, it's as if the phantom carriage has disappeared into thin air," she said excitedly.

"And it has to be a silent engine, a very silent engine, in the van."

They crowded there in the darkness, more afraid than each would hint, but excited too.

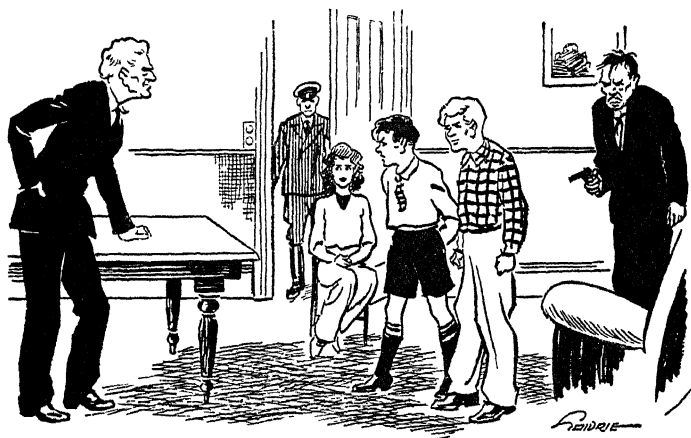
"No wonder Mr. Gage was scared of anyone seeing this," whispered Nancy. "He used this and the Phantom Dog to frighten people, and——."

"But why? Why?"

"Oh, I can't think of that all at once, Bill Goodey. Haven't I done enough, showing you the Horseless Carriage? I daresay he's doing some smuggling, or making forged notes, or——."

The words died in Nancy's throat, for the garage was suddenly illuminated with light.

Andy blinked, under the sudden shock. He rubbed at his eyes, and then saw the villainous looking Blakelock, one hand at a light switch near the small door. With him was Mr. Evelyn Gage, on whose lean, yellowish face was a smile, but there was no smile in his slatey-grey eyes, as he narrowly watched the three startled children.



CHAPTER VII

THE MORSE CODE

NANCY, her face screwed up in disgust was muttering away.

"I said we should have gone to the police. If you'd listened to me, Bill——."

"Police? Police?" Mr. Gage evidently had sharp ears. "What on earth do you mean, child?"

The three were silent, as he squeezed past the cars, and then came towards them. Blakelock, scowling, stood guarding the door. Mr. Gage tilted his white head to one side, as if he couldn't quite understand.

"You didn't say 'police,' of course, Nancy?" he said gently, and the girl looked at Bill and Andy for support. Andy was rubbing one leg up and down the other. He wished there was a chance of dashing out of the garage to escape, but Blakelock looked too vicious and strong.

"Mr. Gage——."

"Ah, young Bill," beamed the owner of Limpey's Hall. "We can get some sense out of you, I know. These other two are—hrrm—much too imaginative, I'm sure."

"If you think it's jolly well just imagination that we saw a headless dog that was just an ordinary dog with luminous paint and——."

"Nancy. I was speaking to Bill." Mr. Gage might have been a teacher, reprimanding a pupil, instead of the dangerous and clever criminal the children believed him to be. "What is all this, Bill?" he sighed.

"Well——?"

"And why are you here, at this time of night. You wouldn't—ah—be suspicious of me, would you?"

The three children looked at each other. They felt lost. Mr. Gage, they thought, should be sinister or gloating, but instead he looked sorrowful. Andy remembered that steely look in his eyes, however.

"We—we followed a car down here, Mr. Gage," Bill said at last. "It was the ghost carriage, and it had a puncture, and we——."

"And this," broke in Nancy, banging the side of the trade van; "is it!"

"Dear me, how impulsive you are, child. Blakelock, do you hear that? These children think that Gleason's trade van is the—hrrm—the ghost carriage. How strange."

Blakelock didn't say anything. His cavernous eyes were very much alive, however.

"Well, what do you make of that, Mr. Gage?" Andy said, spreading out the painted canvas.

"It looks as if someone has been daubing paint about," beamed the man.

"Daubing it! With this cover over the van it'd look like the Horseless Carriage, and——."

"You jolly well know it, too." Nancy was too impulsive to bottle up whatever she thought.

"Dear me. I—hrrm—I think we had better go into the house and talk this out. Don't you, Blakelock? All this talk about Gleason's van being the Horseless Carriage is most interesting——most interesting."

The man grinned evilly, but it was the quiet voice of Mr. Evelyn Gage which chilled the three children more.

"It—it's late, Mr. Gage. We—we ought to be going, and——."

"My dear Bill, I couldn't think of allowing you to go. Not yet. I'm sure that I can persuade you all to—no, Blakelock, no! You don't need the gun."

He spoke gently. A snub nosed automatic had appeared in his man's cruel hand. There was no doubt at all now of Mr. Gage's intentions, despite the quietness of his voice.

"Now look here, Mr. Gage," began Andy stoutly, but then the man caught firmly hold of his arm, and Bill's.

"We can talk much better indoors," he said genially. "Blakelock, escort the young lady, will you? And—hrrm—well, we do intend to offer our hospitality, do we not?"

If Blakelock had no use for words himself, he knew what his master meant, for the gun appeared in his hand again, and he came round the cars, to grab the arm of Nancy. Still chatting affably, Mr. Gage led the way out of the garage, and across the dark yard to the house. He held the arms of Bill and Andy tightly. Behind was Blakelock with the gun, and the two boys knew how foolish it would be to try to escape.

Andy's brain was in a whirl now.

They had solved the mystery of the Headless Dog, and the Horseless Carriage. It was quite plain now that Mr.

Gage had these ghostly things careering over the bleak marshes, to frighten the superstitious village folks and marsh dwellers, but why?

What grim thing went on at the lonely Limpey's Hall, that Mr. Gage was afraid of prying eyes? And where did Larry Goodey fit into the mystery? Even if they could find the answers to these questions, they had no means of informing the police. What could they do?

The questions beat into Andy's mind, as the outer door was locked behind them, and Mr. Gage, arms round their shoulders now, like a kind-hearted host, took them through the kitchen to the large sitting room.

"Ah, now we are nice and cosy," he beamed. "Nancy, is that chair comfortable? Bill——."

He seemed to be genuinely concerned about their comfort, but the children knew that it was all an act.

"We won't get very far with this kind of talk, Mr. Gage," Bill broke in stolidly. "We want to get home."

"Oh, I don't think you will be going home for quite a long time, Bill."

"If ever." The two words came from Blakelock with a horrible, twisted smile. He seemed to get a lot of enjoyment from saying them.

"If you jolly well think——."

"We don't—ah—think, Nancy. We know. But of course you will be quite comfortable. Blakelock is quite a good cook—but I think I told you that before. And I know Andy here," Mr. Gage beamed, "Andy, who loves thrilling adventures, would like to be bound and gagged, but—ah—that won't be at all necessary. No one would hear you calling out. The walls of this old house are thick, and no one comes near Limpey's Hall, in any case."

"You can't keep us here," Nancy snapped. "We'll be

missed, and our folks'll come searching, and——."

"And I have no doubt that Blakelock and I will be helping to search for you. We shall be most anxious and distressed—you were such good little friends of mine. And—ah, come in, Gleason," he said, as the door opened, and a man hesitated on the threshold. "Meet some little—hrrm—detectives who have solved the mystery of the Horseless Carriage."

The man came in. He was small, and wiry, with the dark livery of a chauffeur, and a sly, cunning face. His shifty eyes looked uneasily at the three children.

"I don't like this, Mr. Gage," he muttered. "I don't know that I've liked any of it. Bringing the stuff down was dangerous enough, but now with kids snoopin' around——"

"Not for much longer they won't snoop," Blakelock growled. This was quite a long speech for Blakelock and it was accompanied by a gloating leer. He was thoroughly enjoying himself now that he was able to come out into the open.

"Andy and Bill and Nancy are our guests," Mr. Gage said, smiling. "Just that, Gleason. Shall we—ah—show them to their room, Blakelock?"

Andy had been watching. Blakelock had put the gun away and was moving towards the inner door which apparently led to the stairs. Gleason had moved away from the other door. Andy sped for that one, and was dragging it back to escape from the house to bring help when a bullet shattered the panel against his hand. He drew back, sick inside, wondering if he was hurt.

"I could ha' put a bullet right through him."

"Tut-tut, Blakelock. We don't have to press our hospitality with a gun. Come, Andy." Mr. Gage caught Andy's trembling arm. "You will be quite comfortable, I assure you."

Nancy's face was white now. Bill's lips were pressed tightly. The very quietness of Mr. Gage was a menace, he knew; a man who wouldn't shrink at murder, if it was necessary to gain his ends, whatever they might be.

In silence the three were half pushed up the steep stairs of the old house. They wondered what lay ahead along the dark landing, but then Blakelock shone a torch up another small flight of stairs, to an attic. The late moon had risen now. The small window of the attic allowed a pale light to come through, revealing a sloping ceiling, and nothing in the room but a pile of old blankets.

By the light of the torch, Mr. Gage looked at the window thoughtfully.

"I think, after all, Andy, that we must pander to your love of thrills," he said, shaking his head sadly. "You might attract attention from this window—yes, it will have to be done," he sighed. "Blakelock—some strong cord."

The man came back in a minute or two, and satisfied his own cruel streak by lashing the arms and legs of the three children tightly. They were pushed with their backs to the walls, and a blanket or two draped over them.

"At least we don't need the gags," beamed Mr. Gage. "And you must forgive the absence of supper this once, children. We're busy. We—ah—we're very busy, aren't we, Blakelock. But we can promise you a good breakfast, I think. Goodnight."

He didn't wait for an answer. It was doubtful if the three could have spoken. And then he and Blakelock went out, and the key grated in the lock, and Andy, Bill and Nancy were left, with only the rising moon over the silent marshes a witness to their growing fear.

Andy wriggled with the thin cords which bound him.

He tried to struggle up, but he couldn't bend his

knees. The cords at his wrist cut into his flesh. He struggled to loosen himself but the pain was more than he could bear and so he lay back, panting, as Bill and Nancy with little breathless gasps gave up trying to free themselves.

None of them spoke, for minutes on end.

Andy knew that Bill and Nancy were frightened, as he was frightened. It—it was nothing to be ashamed about, he told himself sturdily. The glint in Mr. Gage's slate-grey eyes told Andy that even their lives meant nothing to him.

And he had thought him such a nice old gentleman, coming down in the train!

Andy gave another tug at the cords, and only succeeded in skinning his wrists. He leaned back again, and stared round the small dark attic room.

Perhaps there was a rusty nail, somewhere or other, with which he could saw at the cords. He rolled over and over in the murky room, feeling with his bound hands, but unsuccessfully. It was no use shouting, he knew. Mr. Gage did, too, or he would have gagged the three of them.

"Are you all right, Andy?"

"Yes, Bill. I was just trying to find a nail, that's all. They didn't use nails in the old days, apparently."

"They used spigots." That was Nancy, her voice a bit quavery.

"We'll now have our next lesson, from Miss Nancy Bates," said Bill, and Andy grinned. Good old Bill. He was just trying to keep their spirits up.

The darkness deepened in the room. The moon was completely gone now. Andy tried to make himself comfortable, but he wasn't very successful.

Oh, well, he'd had his fill of adventure, and this was

where it had got him. He still didn't know the answer to it all, either. Why should Mr. Gage go to all that trouble of sending a Headless Dog rampaging over the marshes, and daub a canvas cover, to make it look like a Horseless Carriage. And the motor boat—that also fitted in somewhere.

And Larry too.

Larry, who had been hunted across the marshes, and who had been too scared or ashamed to stay home, once he was there. The smear of yellow paint linked all of them together. Andy thought and thought, until his head ached, and then he heard Nancy's clear voice come out of the darkness.

"I hope you'll realise now, both of you, that I said we ought to go to the police and——."

"Shut up, Nancy. It isn't like you to say 'I told you so.' "

There was a little silence in the dark room. "S-sorry, Bill," Nancy said, in a meek voice. "I shouldn't have said that. And we're in this jam and we must get out."

"Andy, can you wriggle round, back to me, and try and get your fingers at the knots on my wrist?" panted Bill.

It was easy enough for Andy to roll over, but not so easy to fumble for and find the knots which secured his cousin's wrists. His own wrists were tied so tightly that he could move his own fingers only a little way.

He found the knots, however. In silence he picked and scrabbled at them, breaking his finger nails.

"It—it's no go, Bill. They're too tight for me."

"Let me try yours."

Bill tried, but without success. Nancy was lying there quietly.

"We still don't know what Mr. Gage has been up to,"

she said then. "And what this stuff is that the sly looking Gleason brought down here to Limpey's Hall."

"It's dope, I expect."

Nancy gave a scornful laugh. "Andy, don't be an ass. Dope—as if they'd want a trade van for that! And dope is smuggled into the country, not out of it."

"Whatever that man Gleason brings down here is smuggled out on that fast motor boat, I'm sure."

"And knowing all that won't do us any good, will it?" Bill said soberly.

The children had no idea of the time, but Andy knew that it must be two or three o'clock in the morning.

He thought of the added worry and distress to his Aunt Julia and Uncle Daniel, when he and Bill were discovered missing in the morning. Perhaps it would be thought at first that they'd gone off for an early morning swim, but when they didn't return——? Andy shivered. He—he wondered if they would ever return. If Blakelock had his way they wouldn't.

Despite his uncomfortable position, he felt sleepy. He called out to Nancy, and heard a drowsy little reply. Bill was sitting up straight, staring across the room.

"There's nothing we can do now, Andy."

"Blakelock has taken care of that."

"Perhaps tomorrow we might be able to think of something. It'll be light for us to see then—maybe there's a nail on the wall or sticking from the floor, and we can fray these cords. We—we might as well just take things as they are now."

"Sc-scared, Bill?"

"Y-yes. It—it isn't much good saying I'm not, is it?"

The moon crept round a little. Andy could see the dim outline of Nancy now, her head lolled in sleep. He

felt the sand gritting his eyelids, and then he, too, slept. Not very comfortably, but he slept.

. . . . He woke, to find that the room was light. He wondered why he couldn't move his arms and his legs, and then the memory of the night before swept over him.

Bill was awake, and had edged the blankets away. Nancy was just stirring. Then her eyes opened wide, and her lips parted.

"I wondered if I dreamed all this," she mumbled.

Before any of them could answer, the door opened. Mr. Gage came in, followed by Blakelock with a loaded tray.

"You slept well, I hope," Mr. Gage said anxiously. "The beds were rather hard and primitive, I fear, but it was such short notice. I think Blakelock has excelled himself with the breakfast, however."

"I hate you more'n ever when you talk smarmy."

"Nancy. Smarmy! What a terrible word for a young girl to use." The man's slate-grey eyes glittered, however. "We—hrrm—we can allow you just the use of your hands to manage your breakfast. Blakelock, see to it, will you?"

The man roughly untied the cords at their wrists. The pain was even worse, as the circulation was released, and it was some time before Andy, at least, could pick up his knife and fork.

"Omelettes. Blakelock's specialities. Made from plovers and moorhens eggs——."

"And I shouldn't wonder if there's some poison as well."

"That was Blakelock's wish, Nancy," beamed the owner of Limpey's Hall, "but of course I couldn't allow that. You will be leaving in a couple of days, anyway."

"Leaving? Do you mean——?"

"Yes, Andy. I—hrrm—don't expect we shall be here to see you go. We leave tonight. I shall probably write

a letter explaining your whereabouts to the police."

Blakelock grinned. A swift look passed between the two, and Andy realised, then, that Mr. Gage would never allow them to tell their story to the police.

"You don't jolly well intend us to be found or——."

"Dear me, Andy, how crude you are. If—hrrm—if Limpey's Hall should be burned up, before the police get my note——."

"It'll burn up in no time at all," said Blakelock, his lips twisted evilly.

"But don't let that upset your appetites. Perhaps there won't be a fire, although Blakelock is so careless with matches sometimes, and he spilt a whole drum of paraffin this morning. So clumsy of him. Nancy, the omelette is to your liking?"

Nancy was nearly choking. Her face was white and frightened now. The quiet, remorseless voice of Mr. Gage impelled fear.

"I—I suppose you'll be going in that motor boat?"

"How clever of you to guess that, Bill. Yes, in the motor boat."

"And if it hadn't have been for us, you'd have stayed here at Limpey's Hall, with whatever dirty game you're up to," Nancy said triumphantly.

"Yes. Because of you interfering little brats."

The mask was down from the urbane Mr. Gage now. He flicked Andy with the back of his hand, and the boy winced.

"It was so easy before," the man snarled. "So safe and easy. We only had to mention the Headless Dog, to keep those superstitious country yokels away from Limpey's Hall. And when that ghost carriage made its appearance—you wouldn't get anyone on these marshes after dark for a pension. And the ghost carriage was handy

to bring the stuff down, and but for you brats——.”

“What stuff?”

Mr. Gage glared at Bill. There was the hint of madness in his eyes. Then he controlled himself with an effort, and the smile came back to his thin, yellowish face.

“I learned from an old Chinese philosopher that all anger is futile. Forgive me, Andy. And you, Bill—Nancy. Can’t you eat any more breakfast? Such a pity. Blake-lock——?”

The man didn’t need any telling. With cruel strength he tied the wrists of the children again. It gave him pleasure to pull the cord deep into their flesh.

“Now you can meditate once more,” beamed Mr. Gage, stepping towards the door. “Come, Blakelock—there’s still a lot to be done.”

The key turned in the lock.

“An omelette. Plovers and moorhens eggs—and I couldn’t eat a thing,” wailed Nancy. “And my favourite omelette, too.”

“It isn’t the food I’m worrying about. You heard what he said. About the—the fire, and——.”

“Bill, you don’t think——?”

“I wouldn’t put anything past Mr. Gage. We’ve got to do something. If we could find a nail or something——.”

The eyes of the three searched the bare floor and walls. High on the wall was a rusty nail, but it was useless, for none of them could reach it. Not a nail of any sort stuck up from the floor.

“Listen. Bill—Andy. What’s that?”

Nancy spoke the words excitedly. The two boys listened. Andy could hear nothing above the hammering of his heart.

“I can’t——.”

“Now. Listen, it’s there again. It’s someone tapping.”

Now they could all hear it, a low, muffled tapping, through the wall against which they sat. They held their breath and listened.

"It's a Morse code," Nancy said eagerly. "I had to learn that, when Mummy made me join the Guides—I soon came out of it, but——."

"Perhaps it's Larry," Bill broke in, his eyes sparkling.

"Keep quiet, everybody—keep quiet, now."

Nancy, bound as she was, edged her way round, so that her feet were touching the wall. Bill and Andy felt out of it, as the heel of her shoe tapped out a Morse signal.

"Ask if it is Larry," Bill said eagerly.

"That's what I'm doing, ass." The signal went on, and then through the wall came the low, muffled tap again.

Nancy whispered the letters as they came through. "L—A—R——yes, it is Larry, it is Larry. Bill——."

"Ask him if he's all right. Tell him who we are. And Nancy——."

"Heh, this is the Morse code, not a radio station. One thing at a time."

The children had forgotten their own danger, as they listened to Nancy tapping out the message, and the reply that came through.

"Larry says that he's all right. He says he's worried about us, though."

"So are we." Andy even managed a bleak little grin. "Ask him——."

"Shush. He's tapping again."

Nancy listened intently. She felt very superior that she, a girl, should know the Morse code and could speak to Larry, a prisoner in the next room, while Andy and Bill listened and looked on helplessly.

"He asks how your mother is, Bill."

"I knew he'd ask that. Tell him mother's been worrying. Tell him—oh, cripes, I wish we could get in there to him," Bill burst out.

"He's tied up, the same as we are," Nancy explained, after she had listened to a further message. "He says we're not to do anything rash, because Mr. Gage is a desperate man."

"As if we don't know that!"

"And as if we could do anything, anyway!"

The thought that Larry was helpless in Mr. Gage's power, as well, made Andy writhe again at the cords which bound him. The only result was that he rubbed some more skin from his wrists. He did manage to edge his way up the wall, however, so that he was standing up, or, rather, leaning for support against the wall.

"Can you see out of the window, Andy?" Nancy asked.

"Maybe I can, when I edge round to it."

It was difficult, half rolling himself along the wall. He reached the corner of the room, and then staggered towards the window, catching his chin on the ledge. The blow sickened him a little, but then he straightened himself, and stared through the closed window.

"It isn't a bit of good shouting, I suppose," he muttered.

"Only if you can see anyone. And not much use then, I expect."

"Can you see anyone, Andy?" Nancy asked excitedly.

"Not a blithering sign of anything moving," Andy answered disgustedly. "And I can see right across the marshes to your cottage, Nancy. And the high barn of Colward Farm—I can see that."

Nancy drew a deep breath. "I—I expect Mummy is off her head with worry," she muttered. "Your folks too, Bill." She tore furiously at her bonds. "We ought to be able to do something."

That almost frantic thought of Nancy's remained with Bill and Andy, all that morning.

Now and again Nancy tapped out messages to Larry, in the next room, and received them too. The summer sun outside was brilliant by this time and the small room in which they were imprisoned was flooded with light. Mr. Gage came up with a meal at noon.

"It's just bread and cheese and cocoa for lunch, I'm afraid," he said sorrowfully. "Blakelock is—hrrm—he is very busy indeed."

"Getting the motor boat ready for tonight, I suppose?"

"How amazing that you should guess, Bill," beamed Mr. Gage. "And do you know, he has been so rushed that he even spilt two cans of petrol in the kitchen this morning."

The children's face whitened. The quiet words of Mr. Gage were more terrifying than any threats could be.

"You—you fiend," Nancy burst out. "You wouldn't dare——."

"But can I help accidents, my dear child? I might light a cheroot, to help me forget my disappointment at leaving this old house which has been so very useful to me. I might flick the match away—so——!"

He laughed. There was no mirth in the laugh; nothing but a cold, implacable purpose, and the blood of the children ran cold.

"W—we know you've got Larry Goodey tied up in the next room," Andy said stoutly.

"Larry was rather a foolish boy. He—ah—he didn't do as he was told. I'm afraid you have all been rather foolish."

Mr. Gage tied their wrists again, after they had finished their cocoa. None of them could eat. There was a heavy silence, when they were alone again. Each was occupied

with the dreadful fate which Mr. Gage's quiet voice had so vividly conjured up.

Larry was tapping through the wall again. Dash—dash—dot—dot—dot—dot—. Andy thought of the cottage, clear across the marshes, and then his eyes suddenly sparkled, as the sun peeped right through the window of the attic.

"Bill—Nancy—I've got it. We're going to get out of here. The Morse code—good losh alive, why didn't I think of that before!"

Bill stared up eagerly from the floor.

Nancy paused in the middle of tapping out a message to Larry, and her dust-smeared face was suddenly alive with hope.

"What is it, Andy?"

"Oh, blister it, I forgot," Andy muttered disgustedly. "We've nothing to signal with. I was forgetting. We need something shiny. A mirror, or——."

"A mirror?"

Nancy looked a little bit embarrassed. She was so much of a tomboy that she hated anyone to think that she had any feminine failings, and she coloured up a little.

"I—I've got a mirror, Andy. A bit of a one. It's cracked——."

"It doesn't matter a bit. Can you get at it?"

Nancy twisted and turned, but she couldn't. The mirror was in the hip pocket of her shabby old grey flannel trousers.

"Andy, no. But it's there—I can feel that it's there. If——."

"Perhaps I can get it out."

Bill edged round, back to Nancy, and his fingers groped for the pocket, and at last managed to extract the mirror. Andy was breathing heavily.

"Do you see what I mean, Nancy? You'll have to do the signalling. And—oh, gosh, you won't be able to hold the mirror above the level of the window sill, will you? I was thinking if you could, and flashed a message across the marshes——."

"It'd sure to be seen. And Mummy would understand any message—she's sure to be searching for me, and—Andy, with my wrists tied like this I couldn't reach over the sill," wailed Nancy.

"Could you reach down, Nancy, and get the mirror between your teeth?" Bill said quietly. "It only feels a small one. And then you could hobble over to the window——."

"You've got it, Bill—you've got it."

All eagerness now, Bill and Nancy scrambled up. Andy just held his breath as the girl bent slowly down, to get the small mirror which Bill held behind him in her mouth. If—if it should fall, and break——? Nancy must have thought the same, for she was quivering, but then she got her teeth over the edges, and hobbled round to the window.

She steadied herself, against the sill, and then moved her head, so that the sun caught the mirror.

"Good old Nancy," muttered Bill, and the girl flushed a little with pride.

Then, moving her head, so that the sun caught the mirror in a series of long and short flashes, she sent out an S O S. Again and again she flashed it, until her mouth ached through holding the mirror, and then Bill edged round to take it from between her lips.

"Perhaps we can try again later on," Andy suggested. "And keep on trying."

"I'll tell Larry what we've done now," Nancy exclaimed and she tumbled down to the floor, and beat out a

triumphant message to Larry in the next room. His message back, "Good for you, kid," made her just wriggle with pride.

They waited, anxiously. Half an hour—an hour. The house was quiet. Nothing stirred over the marshes, when Andy hobbled to the window to look.

"We'd better try again," he said anxiously. "Nancy—."

"I'm ready."

The urgency was gripping Andy now. He guessed by the sun that it was late afternoon, and there was little enough time to spare. Again Nancy managed to get the mirror between her teeth, and again she flashed the SOS across the marshes, adding their names, and a warning of Mr. Gage.

So intent were Bill and Andy on this silent message flashing across the marshes that they didn't hear the door open. The next moment Mr. Gage stalked across the room, tore the mirror from the girl's mouth, and smashed it on the floor. His yellowish face was twisted with rage.

"So you're so clever, eh?" he snarled. He flicked Bill and Andy viciously with the back of his hand. "So! It means—Blakelock!"

The man came in.

"We'll have to hurry, Blakelock—hurry. These brats have been sending a message with a mirror. I don't know if it has been understood, or not——."

"I told yer we should ha' finished 'em orf," growled Blakelock.

"Make sure they're tied securely, Blakelock. And the young fool in the other room. Gleason has gone, hasn't he? And Blakelock——."

Their eyes met. Blakelock grinned evilly, and rattled the box of matches in his pocket.

"Th-they wouldn't dare do that," mumbled Nancy, when they were alone. "Not to—to set light to the house, when we——."

"They would. And soon, too."

"And if Nancy's message wasn't seen——."

The dreadful fear hung heavily in the room now. It was useless to try to wrest themselves free, but each one of them tried. Andy caught sight of the blood on the girl's lips then.

"Nancy, did he hurt you? When he snatched that mirror out of your mouth and—good losh alive, Bill, why didn't we think of that! Those bits of broken mirror——."

He rolled over and over, until he caught a sliver of the broken mirror between his fingers. Above the silence of the room now, he heard a low, muffled crackling.

"Bill——."

"That's it, Nancy." Bill's face was strained. "The devils have set the place alight. Andy——?"

"I'm hurrying all I can."

Andy felt the blood trickling down his fingers, as he turned round to saw at the cords at Bill's wrists. Once he heard Bill give a gasp of pain, and he knew that he had dug the glass into his flesh, but time was precious now. The crackle of the flames grew fiercer. Smoke wisped through the cracks of the door.

"I—I can't do any more, Bill," gasped Andy. "I can't hold the—the glass—it's gone now——."

"P-perhaps I can snap the rope now."

Bill strained, exerting all his young strength. Again and again he tugged, fighting down the pain, and then at last one of the strands of cord frayed apart. Precious minutes were gone, however, before Bill could get his hands free. The smoke was filling the room. The flames were roaring now.

Bill sawed at Andy's cords with another broken sliver of the glass. His hand was shaking, and more than once he dug the jagged end into Andy's wrist. The crackle of the flames was like a threatening song now. Nancy was trying to fight down her fear.

"B-Bill——."

"I—I'll get to you as—as soon as I've cut Andy's ropes," panted Bill. "Perhaps——."

"You should've seen to Nancy first," muttered Andy.

"D-don't worry about me—we're all in this together. And when—oh good!" whispered Nancy through pale lips, as Andy was freed. "Bill, here——."

"I—I might hurt you."

"As if I care," the girl said scornfully.

She winced, however, as the broken mirror rasped her flesh now and again. Her eyes were bright with pain, and, when she rose stiffly from her chair, the cords dropping from her, the pain was even more acute as the circulation came back into her cramped limbs.

Andy and Bill were choking as the smoke seeped into the room.

"We won't let them get away with this," growled Bill. "They'll try to escape in their boat, and——."

"We've got to save Larry first."

"As if I'd forget Larry!"

The door was unlocked. As Andy opened it a billow of smoke surged in. The well of the stairs was an inferno of flame and smoke, and the children staggered back, choking.

"Nancy, you climb out by the window. There's no need——."

"We're staying together. Creep along on your tummies—it's clearer on the floor."

Choking and gasping with the smoke, the three threw

themselves down to the floor, and crawled along the passage. In the heart of the smoke were vivid tongues of flame, crackling as they devoured the stairs. In Bill's mind was a fear that Larry's room would be locked, and precious minutes would be wasted forcing it open, and he gave a little cry of relief when the door gave to his hand.

When they were inside, Nancy kicked the door back with her foot. Larry was lashed to a chair, his black hair tumbled over his white face.

"Is—is it you, Bill? Is——?"

"You can't see us for smoke, but it's us all right. Larry, where are you? Where——?"

"He's here, Bill," choked Nancy. She reached out her hand to guide Bill. "Hurry—hurry!"

"How did you kids get free? I—I thought——."

"We'll soon have the ropes off you, Larry."

The smoke cleared a little as Andy swung the window wide. There were anxious minutes, however, as Bill sawed at Larry's cords with the fragment of glass. The door creaked under the fury of the flames. When Larry was free he staggered, and then rubbed at his arms and legs.

"I'm ready for Mr. Gage now," he said, quietly, and then Andy, at the window, gave a shout.

"I believe there's someone coming down the marsh road——."

"They won't be in time to catch Gage and Blakelock. Nancy——."

The girl knew what Bill meant. She peeped out of the window. The window immediately below was like a red eye, reflecting the flames in the room below. She could see a rainpipe almost hidden in the thick creeper of the wall.

She swung herself out of the window, and shinned down the pipe like a boy.

"Andy."

"Larry should be next," Andy said stoutly, but Larry shook his head.

"I'm the heaviest—I might break the pipe, and then you'll all be in a jam. Get going," he said grimly.

Andy hesitated, and then the door collapsed, and the roaring tongues of flame leaped into the room. Andy wasted no more time then. Within minutes the three of them swarmed down the pipe, to rejoin Nancy below.

"My goodness gosh," mumbled Andy, as he stared back at Limpey's Hall, like a red, many-eyed monster.

"Do you feel fit enough to tackle Gage? If we don't—"

"They'll get away," finished Nancy, and she brandished her fists. "Come on."

They raced away from the burning Hall. It was late evening now. Before they reached the marshes they heard shouts, and they waited, impatiently, as Uncle Daniel, Mrs. Bates, and three farm-hands armed with pitchforks came racing from Uncle Daniel's shabby old car.

"Nancy." To the girl's disgust, her mother clasped her tightly. "You're hurt. Your wrists are bleeding. I—I read your message——."

"I'm all right, mother—I'm all right. You don't have to hug me. We can't waste a minute."

"Larry."

That was Uncle Daniel, his hand clasped in that of his elder son's, and an unspoken question in his eyes.

"There's a lot to tell you, dad, but——."

"We'll have to leave the explanations until later," Bill interrupted hurriedly. "Mr. Gage and Blakelock are escaping."

"But——."

"We'll tell you later."

Bill and Andy and Nancy were ahead, their cut wrists

forgotten, as they raced across the marshes. Behind them, the beams of Limpey's Hall crashed in flames. A cloud of dust along the Marsh Road told of the swift passage of the fire engine, sent out from Bardwell. The plovers wheeled over the marshes in sudden fright as the little party thundered across the coarse grass.

More than once they waded across the wide ditches, rather than waste time looking for the bridges which spanned them. At last they reached the sea-wall. The low throb of a motor boat reached their ears.

"The tide is in," shouted Nancy in dismay. "They'll be able to get their boat off."

"Nancy, if we knew what was happening," began her mother, helplessly, but then Andy gave a yell.

"There's Gage. And Blakelock is trying to push the motor boat off the mud."

They scrambled down to the salterns, and Gage, who was running towards the boat, suddenly turned, a venomous look on his lean, yellow face. His man Blakelock dropped the pole he was using to push the boat out of the rill to the river beyond, and ran towards Gage.

"You children—keep out of this," roared Uncle Daniel, and, as he raced ahead, he grabbed the hay fork from one of his men. "They're dangerous, seemly."

"They're that all right."

"Keep back," snapped Gage, and he snatched a gun from his pocket. "Blakelock, you fool, get back to the boat! Push her into deep water. You idiot——."

"You won't dare shoot," bellowed Uncle Daniel, but then the gun spat flame.

"That's just to show you I mean business. And the next time——"

Mr. Gage finished up with a yelp of pain. As swift as forked lightning, Uncle Daniel threw the hay-fork, which

flew like a gleaming arrow to knock Mr. Gage's arm backwards. The gun dropped from his numbed hand.

Then Uncle Daniel, growling under his breath, was upon him. Larry and the other men tackled Blakelock. They knew the strong and angry Uncle Daniel didn't need help. Nancy danced with excitement on the salterns.

"Give it to 'em. Sock into 'em. Give Blakelock one for me, Larry."

"Nancy!"

The girl wrinkled her nose. She just had to let off steam now. And Bill and Andy, breathlessly, quivering with reaction, rubbed at their smoke blackened faces, as Mr. Gage and the evil-looking Blakelock were overpowered.

It was quite an end to a day's adventure, they thought, as they grinned feebly at each other.



CHAPTER VIII

LARRY EXPLAINS

THE big sitting-room at Colward Farm was full, later that night. The smell of burning came in on the night air. The fire brigade from Bardwell was standing by at the gutted Limpey's Hall, to prevent the flames reaching the dry marshes.

Mr. Gage and Blakelock were in cells at Malton.

Aunt Julia had made Larry and Bill and Andy get into hot baths, and now, rested and cleaned, with Nancy fresh and glowing from a tub as well, the three children waited eagerly for Larry's part of the story.

The police inspector was in the farm kitchen. Mrs. Bates was there, hovering anxiously near Nancy, which made the girl annoyed. "Just as if I'm a bit of a kid," she thought. Aunt Julia was briskly serving up coffee, and home-made scones, her eyes resting on Larry with thankfulness every now and again.

"Of course, there'll be a reward for these youngsters," Inspector Kippax from Malton said. "And a pretty big one, too, by the way of things——."

"We'd like to know what we've done?" Nancy said, wriggling in her seat.

"Young Larry here could tell you, but perhaps I'd better. You've managed to catch, in Mr. Evelyn Gage, one of the cleverest receivers of stolen art treasures in the whole country—perhaps even the world."

"Good losh alive," mumbled Andy.

"I expect you've all read of the art robberies, all over the country," went on the Inspector, as he crammed a pipe full of tobacco. "The man who was behind the robberies—Mr. Gage—was clever. A Holbein from a Manchester art gallery, a Rubens from a Birmingham salon, perhaps—oh, he picked his masterpieces, all right. From the time the canvases were stolen, we never heard another word of them. There are always rich collectors who will give a fantastic price for a masterpiece, even if they never dare admit that they have it."

"But I don't see where Larry comes in to all this?" demanded Uncle Daniel, and Aunt Julia gave him a nudge. Larry flushed.

"You might as well all know it," he said quietly then. "I've told the Inspector. I expect I shall be charged and——."

"You won't have much done to you, lad," Inspector Kippax said kindly. "Whatever you did was under pressure."

"Thanks," Larry said gratefully. "Anyway, I—I met Mr. Gage in London. I'd met him once or twice down here, remember—it was partly through him that I went up to London to try my hand at art."

He drew a deep breath. "I didn't make a go of it.

I couldn't sell a canvas. I was hard up, hungry—I'd got too much pride to come home, or write for money. Mr. Gage paid me a small cheque, for a charcoal sketch. It was for—for two pounds. I—I think he did it just to tempt me—to get me into his power. I altered that cheque to twenty pounds—I needed much more than that, really——."

"Larry!" His mother whispered the word.

"I paid for it," Larry went on grimly. "He held that over my head. I was afraid of the shame and disgrace—for you folks back here as well. And then Gage told me what I had to do. I had to paint over those stolen pictures. He—he—," Larry went red again; "he said that by the time I'd painted a scene over them they wouldn't look worth the canvas they were on——."

"But wouldn't that spoil the original picture, Larry?" Bill asked.

"No. The canvases were smuggled abroad, and then a good art restorer cleaned off my daubs, and there were the masterpieces, ready for a purchaser."

Nancy almost bounced on her chair.

"That explains why Mr. Gage was so startled when Andy saw that yellow paint on his sleeve?"

"I expect so. Mr. Gage made me come down here to Limpey's Hall. That luminous Headless Dog was keeping folks off the marshes at night then—and the van which brought down the stolen canvases was made to look like a ghost carriage. Gage couldn't afford folks to pry too much. And then I escaped and—and came here——."

"You should have stayed, Larry boy. We——."

"I was too ashamed. I wrote the note to you and left, meaning to go back to London. But Gage and Blakelock met me, on the marshes, and—and set on me and forced me back to Limpey's. And—and that's all."

There was a silence for a few minutes. Each one of them there knew that, in Mr. Evelyn Gage, a clever and a desperate criminal had been caught.

"If it hadn't have been for these youngsters," began Inspector Kippax, and Aunt Julia stopped him, in her direct way.

"I don't believe in praising youngsters too much, Inspector. And it's time they were off to bed. Andy—Bill——."

"W-we ought to see Nancy home first."

"Her mother is here for that. And——."

But Nancy had skipped out, ahead of her mother, and Bill and Andy sidled out, to join her at the farm gate. They walked along the chase towards Kiney's Cottage. The plovers were wheeling over the dusky marsh. From a faraway farm a dog howled.

"I'm glad that message of mine was seen and understood, anyway," Nancy said proudly. "Mummy saw it. And she ran for Mr. Goodey, and he rounded up some of his men, and——."

"And so Mr. Gage and Blakelock were caught."

Andy scuffed at a stone with his foot. So much had happened, since he first dropped his suitcase on Mr. Gage's head in the train. The rest of his holiday might seem flat, after all the excitement.

Mrs. Bates came briskly down the chase, and told Nancy to hurry up in.

"Treating us as kids," Nancy mumbled rebelliously. "After all we've done."

Andy grinned. There'd be no holding Nancy now. Then he yawned, and looked over the dark, sleeping marsh.

"Good losh alive, what a lovely night for some thrills and adventure, Bill," he mumbled.

"I'm for bed," yawned his cousin sleepily. "We've had enough excitement for one week."

And Nancy, going to Kiney Cottage, and Andy, going sleepily homewards with Bill, thoroughly agreed.